The New Criterion

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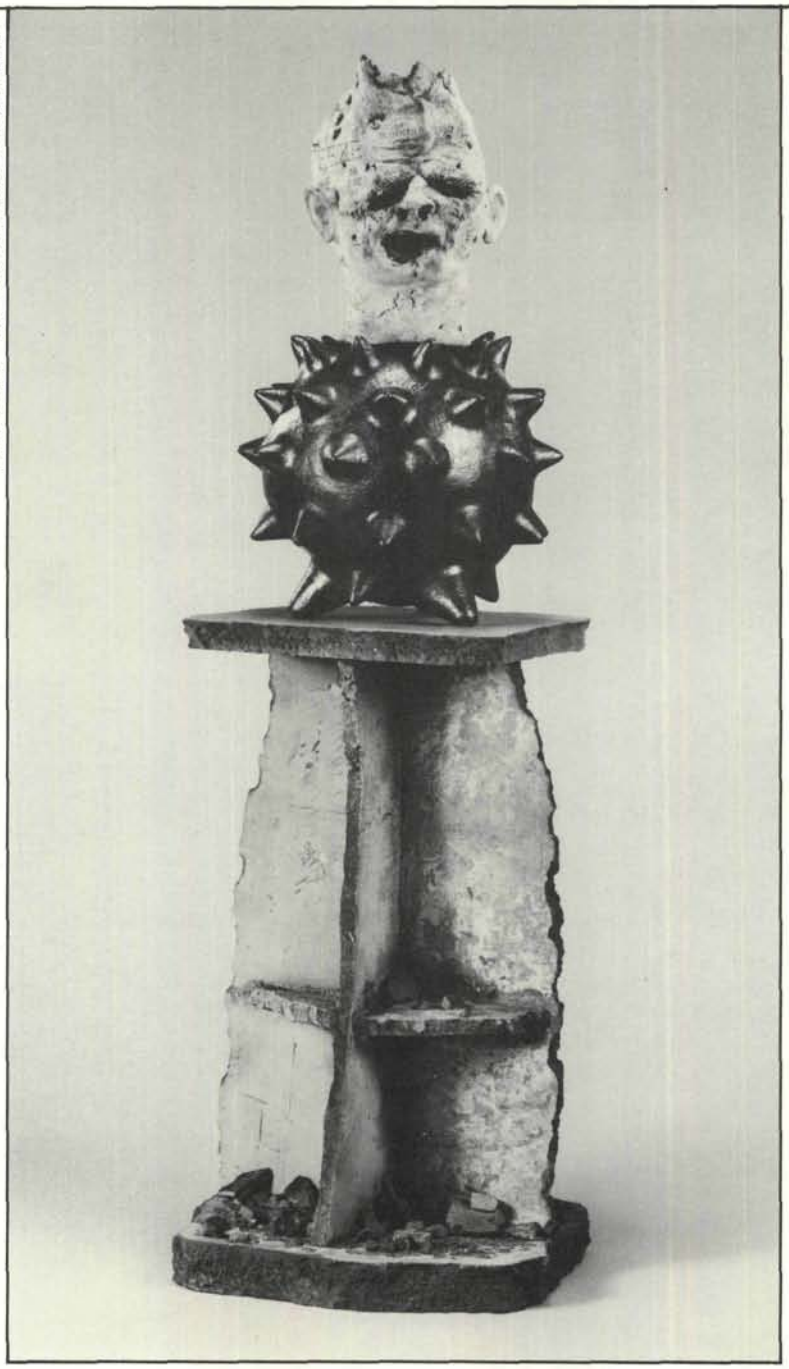

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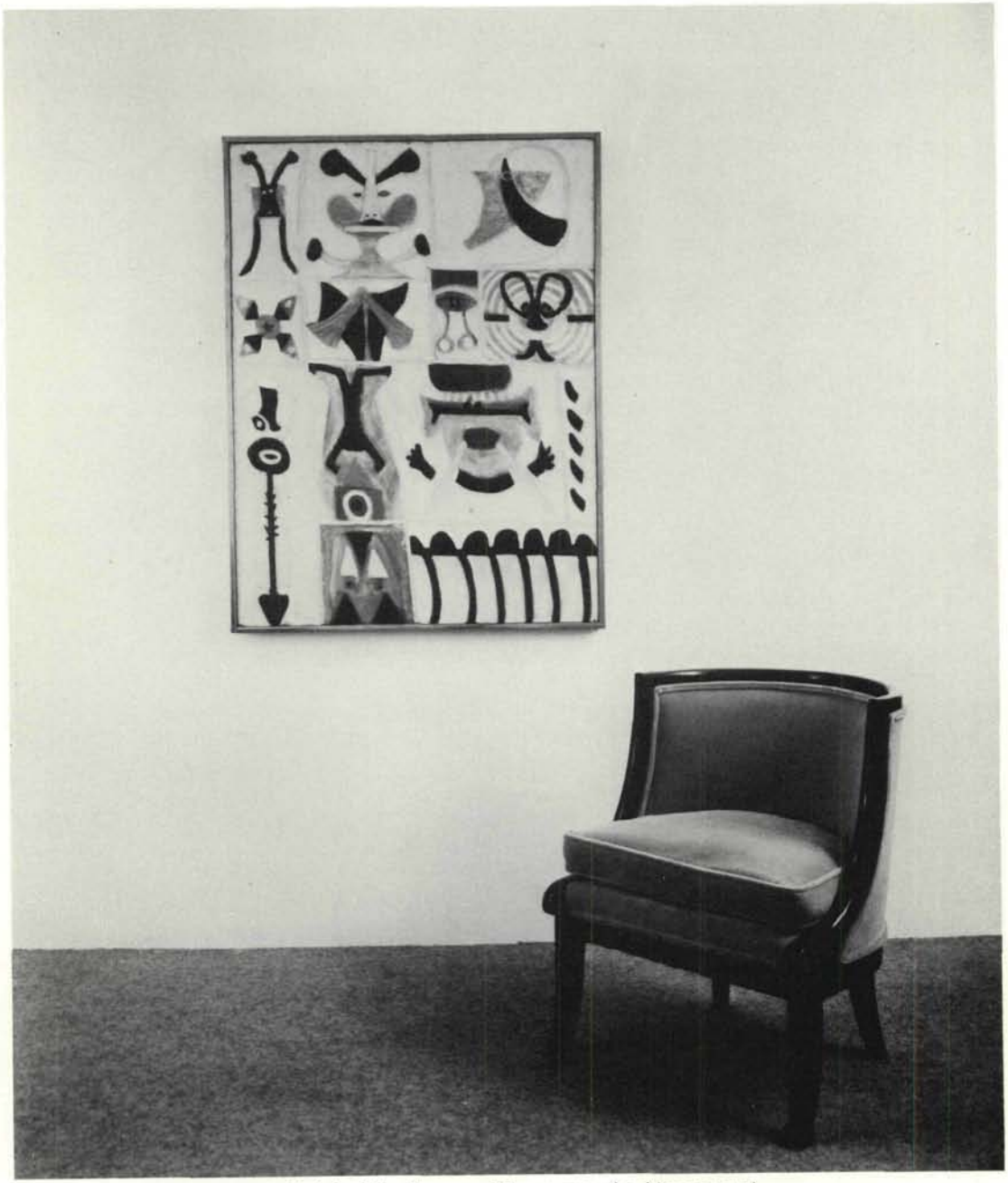

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Fairfield Porter: an American classic

by Hilton Kramer

Not the least of the many extraordinary things about the Fairfield Porter retrospective, which Kenworth Moffett recently organized at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, was the way it resulted—overnight, as it were—in a sweeping transformation of the artist's reputation and status.[1] It is one of the functions of a retrospective exhibition, of course, to enlarge our understanding of an artist's work, and this often leads to some modification in our estimate of his achievement. But it is rare, all the same, for such exhibitions to produce the kind of prompt and categorical change in critical opinion that greeted this show. Porter, who died in 1975 at the age of sixty-eight, did not lack for serious admirers in his lifetime. Among certain painters and poets, as among certain critics and collectors, his work had for years commanded an almost abject loyalty. Yet beyond this circle of devotees he continued to be regarded as a minor and somewhat eccentric figure, and the public at large was hardly acquainted with his name. It is not exactly a secret that in New York, where Porter was well known in art circles both as a painter and as a critic, no museum would undertake to organize an exhibition of his work. Even the Whitney Museum, famous for its eclectic taste and flexible standards, had to be coerced into accepting even an abridged version of the Boston show.

It is no exaggeration, then, to say that it is only with this retrospective that Porter has emerged for the first time as an American classic—and an immensely popular one, too. In Boston the Porter show proved to be something of a sensation, bringing in some eighty-five thousand visitors in a period of two months—an astonishing number for an exhibition devoted to a little-known contemporary artist. In the national press, too, the show was treated as a major art event. Even journals that are normally content to act as if contemporary art does not exist—I think particularly of *The New Republic* and *The New York Review of Books*—felt obliged to make an exception in this case and pay the Porter exhibition some sort of critical attention. The former invited no less a literary personage than John Updike to review the show—presumably on the grounds that it takes a WASP to understand a WASP, and that only a professional observer of American middle-class manners could be expected to come to terms with the world depicted in Porter's paintings—while the latter simply

1 "Fairfield Porter (1907–1975): Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction," organized by Kenworth Moffett, was shown at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from January 12 to March 13. An abridged version of the exhibition is currently on view at the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, South Carolina (April 13–June 19), and will then travel to the Cleveland Museum of Art (November 9–December 31), the Museum of Art at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (February 18–April 22, 1984), and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (May 31–July 22, 1984).

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reprinted John Ashbery's affectionate little essay for the exhibition catalogue. (Like many things written about Porter by his friends, this paid a handsome tribute to the man, but had virtually nothing to say about the paintings.) At *The New Yorker,* the assignment to cover the exhibition for "The Art World" column did not go to the magazine's regular art critic—a specialist in the antics of Andy Warhol, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg—but to Whitney Balliett, the resident jazz critic and sometime reviewer of novels who happens to be the fortunate owner of one of the best pictures in the exhibition and may thus be presumed to be a passionate admirer of Porter's work. What is remarkable about all this is not, alas, the critical content of the articles in question—Mr. Balliett's was by far the best, if only for its quotations from Anne Porter, the artist's widow—but just the fact of their publication. Nothing quite like the press coverage of the Porter show had been seen hereabouts since the great Picasso retrospective in 1977, and in that case, of course, it was Picasso's legend that determined the attention. With Porter, it was the exhibition and its coverage that contributed to the creation of a legend.

How are we to account for this response, from both the public and the press, to an artist whose name could scarcely have meant much of anything to either only a short time before? It is usually the case, I think, that such questions, even when answerable, tell us little or nothing about the art that occasions them. But in regard to the Porter exhibition I believe the question goes to something central in the art itself. For Porter's painting seems to elicit in its public a response—a sense of connection and integration—very much akin to the impulse that moved the artist to create it in the first place. We are given a glimpse of what that impulse was in a particularly illuminating passage in Mr. Moffett's essay for the catalogue of the exhibition. (Mr. Moffett's penetrating essay, "The Art of Fairfield Porter," is by far the best thing ever written on Porter's paintings.[2]) In this passage Mr. Moffett is speaking of Porter's special admiration for the paintings of Vuillard and Velázquez, and he draws from this a compelling insight into Porter's own work:

> Porter saw in both Vuillard and Velázquez sovereign artistic personalities who were able to balance their love of the medium and their love of visual reality in such a way as to respect the inherent individuality of both. Here is Porter's ideal . . . . It explains why he liked Vuillard better than Bonnard. For Bonnard's wayward and equivocal brushing imposes itself, however passively, on the structure of reality. Porter didn't like deliberate distortions, which he called "affectation," just as he didn't like bravura, which he called "performance." . . . He felt that it was Vuillard, not Cézanne, who had "made of Impressionism something solid and durable like the art of the museums." "Vuillard organized Impressionist discoveries about color and pigments into a coherent whole." Or Vuillard was more "coherent and orderly" than Monet. Now it can be said that more than Cézanne or Bonnard or Monet, Vuillard, especially the later Vuillard, kept to traditional perspective and drawing. He was innovative, fresh, personal, mostly in his handling of paint and in his unusual sense of color. Something like this could be said about Porter, too; he experienced what we think of as Vuillard's conservatism, a respect for the wholeness, uniqueness, and presence of the world.

It was upon such a hard-won effort to combine his "love of the medium" and his "love of visual reality" that Porter based his own painting from the 1950s onward. Of that, I think, there can be no doubt. And it is in his unusual success in achieving this synthesis of "medium" and "reality" in his painting

2 *Fairfield Porter (1907-1975): Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction.* Essays by John Ashbery and Kenworth Moffett. Contributions by John Bernard Myers, Paul Cummings, Prescott D. Schutz, Rackstraw Downes, and Louise Hamlin. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Little, Brown, 107 pages; $35.00, hardcover, $25.00, paper.

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that the key to his immense appeal at the present time is to be found. For in this painting what Mr. Moffett aptly describes as the "presence of the world" is restored to a place of high importance in pictorial experience, yet this is accomplished without any forfeiture of that priority given to the medium that Porter himself recognized as one of the hallmarks of modernist sensibility. It is precisely this ability to bring together in a unified vision what had more and more come to be divided and codified into separate artistic impulses that distinguishes Porter's work. This is what some of the younger painters of the Fifties and the Sixties were moved to emulate in their own work—and the reason, incidentally, why they looked upon Porter as a hero and an inspiration—and it is what the public has now responded to with so much pleasure and satisfaction. What is involved in this response is not so much a rejection of modernism—for Porter remains an unmistakably modernist painter—as a revisionist view of what modernism in painting entails. What *is* rejected in this revisionist view, if only by implication, is the notion that the only viable modernist art in our time is to be found in the more reductionist modes of abstraction.

Given the appetite for representational imagery that persisted at one or another level of taste, even so-called "advanced" taste, through all the years that abstraction was establishing its reputation as the dominant mode of contemporary art, it may seem surprising that recognition of Porter's quality was so long in coming. After all, the subject-matter of his pictures, with its affectionate concentration on family and friends, on fine houses and flowers and agreeable landscapes, should not in itself have been problematic for conventional tastes, and his handling of these subjects gained significantly in fluency, vitality, and confidence as the artist grew older. All the same, Porter's art proved to be difficult to grasp. It looked too conventional to be avant-garde, yet it was insufficiently "reactionary" in outlook or method to satisfy the philistine standards of the time.

If Porter failed to win the kind of approbation that now seems appropriate to his achievement, it was not simply because his paintings were representational, however. To believe this, as many partisans of representational painting apparently do, betrays a serious misunderstanding of the art history of the last thirty years. In the Fifties, when Porter began exhibiting his work regularly for the first time, there was in fact a distinct prejudice in favor of certain representational styles—and not only among critics writing in the mass media, who for the most part were utterly hostile to the emergence of abstract art, but even among such champions of the avant-garde as *Art News* and the Museum of Modern Art. It is worth recalling, in this connection, that it was in the Fifties that Larry Rivers and other "second generation" figurative painters of the New York School achieved a swift success, and in the Sixties, too, the widespread attention and acclaim that greeted Pop art on its initial appearance can hardly be taken as evidence of a dogmatic resistance to representation as such. What met with resistance wasn't representation, then, but Porter's particular use of it—and the revisionist "reading" of the modernist enterprise that was implied in that use. It was this that made Porter an isolated figure in the Fifties, and it probably accounts as well for the resistance that his painting continued to meet for a long time thereafter. If this resistance has now abated, as I believe it has, it may be that more orthodox interpretations of modernism have had to run their course and more clearly exhibit their exhaustion before this "conservative" view could be given its due.

In the subtitle that he has given to the Boston retrospective—"Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction"—Mr. Moffett alludes to Porter's isolated position while at the same time affirming his own belief in abstraction as the dominant style of the age. This in turn suggests that Porter was something of an anomaly in the art of his time—which, in some respects, he certainly was. Yet he nonetheless had something in com-

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mon with the abstract painters of his generation, and I don't mean only his often professed debt to Willem de Kooning. I think it sheds an interesting light on Porter's development if we see what that common ground was. But in order to understand what it was that he shared with those painters, it must first be understood that it was to the Abstract Expressionist generation that Porter himself belonged—a fact that has been obscured by the history of his reputation. His first solo exhibition took place at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1951, and his work from this period marks the beginning of the oeuvre that Mr. Moffett has brought together in the current retrospective. (The very few earlier works in the exhibition have, at best, a documentary rather than an artistic interest.) This would seem to place Porter in the generation of Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Jane Freilicher, and Robert Goodnough—the so-called "second generation" of the New York School. But it is not to this chronological generation that Porter belongs. In 1951 he was forty-four years old—only three years younger than de Kooning, but actually a few years older than Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Ad Reinhardt. What he shared with some of the older members of this first generation was a protracted and no doubt painful period of uncertainty that effectively postponed the development of an independent style until the brink of middle age.[3]

To what may we ascribe this phenomenon of delayed development in artists who subsequently displayed not only conspicuous talent in many cases but a real gift for invention and originality? Surely there were important personal factors involved, but exactly what these were we are unlikely to know in any concrete detail until a time comes when the biographies of these painters can be written without the restrictions that are inevitably imposed by their heirs and beneficiaries. Yet I doubt if purely personal circumstances will even then account for a phenomenon so widespread in a generation as diverse as this one. We must look, rather, for some larger shaping factor in the history of the period, and my own view is that we are more likely to find it in the cultural imperatives of the Thirties than in the biographies of individual artists.

In any reckoning of these imperatives, especially as they affected Porter's artistic development (but not his alone), there are three that strike me as particularly salient. The first is the immense influence exerted by Marxism and the ethos of the radical movement. Notwithstanding his private income and the leisure and independence this guaranteed him, Porter was more deeply affected by this political current than is nowadays generally recognized. (Not until Rackstraw Downes produced his excellent edition of Porter's critical writings in 1979 was this aspect of the artist's intellectual outlook first documented for us.[4]) He had gone to the Soviet Union as early as 1927, his junior year at Harvard, and is said to have made a sketch of Trotsky at that time. From the Thirties onward Porter seems to have remained some sort of unaffiliated radical, and as late as 1962 he wrote an essay on "Class Content in American Abstract Painting" for *Art News*. For much of his adult life, it seems, Porter was haunted by the need to reconcile art—not only his own, but any art that really meant something to him—with

3 Within this first generation of the New York School, there is a division to be noted between certain of the older and the younger members. Among the younger painters, Motherwell, Pollock, Reinhardt, Pousette-Dart, and Stamos appear to have experienced much less difficulty than some of the older artists in getting started. Some of the latter—especially Rothko, Still, and Newman—did not hit their stride, or in certain cases even begin their stride, until the period following the end of the Second World War. Strictly in terms of the chronology of this artistic development, Porter belongs with this older group, however much he differed from them in his artistic outlook.

4 *Fairfield Porter: Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*, edited by Rackstraw Downes (Taplinger, 1979). See especially the essay, "The Purpose of Socialism," written around 1940.

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his political and social interests. I think it is this need, not always acknowledged as such, that gives to some of his criticism its special moral fervor.

The second of the cultural imperatives I have in mind—the modernist art of Europe, especially as it was shaping American art in the Thirties—was more directly aesthetic. Yet for Porter this aesthetic imperative proved to be almost as difficult to come to terms with as his political interests. He seems not to have been able to make up his mind about it. He neither embraced it nor rejected it, but remained a little outside its appeals. In the Thirties he got to know de Kooning, and bought his work, and in 1938 he saw an exhibition of Bonnard and Vuillard at the Art Institute of Chicago that made an enduring impression on his artistic thought. But the affinity he felt for both de Kooning and Vuillard in the Thirties did not bring Porter any closer to the more radical impulses of modernist painting. This may sound paradoxical, but it isn't. For in the Thirties, de Kooning's painting was not yet as "advanced" as it afterwards became, and Vuillard could certainly not be counted as an avatar of the avant-garde.

In the Thirties, then, Porter could fairly be characterized as a political radical and an artistic conservative. This was not, by the way, at all an uncommon combination of cultural loyalties at the time. One finds something similar in artists as different from each other—and from Porter—as Thomas Hart Benton and Arshile Gorky, even though Benton was more of a reactionary in his attitude toward modernism and Gorky more of an acolyte. (It is a matter of interest, of course, that Porter studied with Benton at the Art Students League.) For Porter, however, more than for many artists of his generation, there was a third imperative that exacerbated his relation to modernist art and contributed to his diffidence. This was his early and enduring admiration for and knowledge of the Old Masters. Mr. Moffett speaks of the role played in the formation of his art by Porter's "early experiences with Old Master painting and his training at Harvard's Fogg Museum, which was then permeated by Renaissance ideals and classical aesthetics." "When studying with Arthur Pope or reading Bernard Berenson's books," Mr. Moffett writes, "Porter's taste for traditional structure and pictorial decorum was probably first confirmed," and he suggests that this was reinforced by Benton's teaching. Porter had met Berenson in Italy in 1931, and this venerable figure—so remote from the concerns of modernist art, yet so authoritative in his discrimination of aesthetic quality—remained for Porter a touchstone of critical wisdom to the end. It seems to me that there was little likelihood that a mind so disposed could ever have brought itself to align its artistic ambitions with the more *révolté* innovations of modernist art, and in fact Porter never did.

It is in the light of these imperatives that we are obliged to consider the most celebrated of the anecdotes connected with Porter's career—the encounter with Clement Greenberg in de Kooning's studio in the late Forties. The story is told by Porter in a conversation he once recorded with Paul Cummings. (An excerpt is reprinted in the catalogue of the exhibition.) Cummings asked Porter if he had ever been an abstract painter, and Porter replied:

> No. One reason I never became an abstract painter is that I used to see Clement Greenberg regularly and we always argued, we always disagreed. Everything one of us said, the other would say no to. He told me I was very conceited. I thought my opinions were as good as his or better. I introduced him to de Kooning (Greenberg was publicizing Pollock at that time), and he said to de Kooning (who was painting the women), "You can't paint this way nowadays." And I thought: Who the hell is he to say that? He said, "You can't paint figuratively today." And I thought: If that's what he says, I think I will do just exactly what he says I can't do. I might have become an abstract painter except for that.

Porter then went on to say:

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> Another reason I paint the way I do is that in 1938 at the Art Institute of Chicago there was an exhibition of Vuillard and Bonnard. I looked at the Vuillards and thought that maybe they were just a revelation of the obvious, and why did one think of doing anything else when it was so natural to do that.

Now this is a very curious story, and is not, I think, to be taken at face value. I am not persuaded that Porter "might have become an abstract painter" under any circumstances, and I doubt if Porter really believed this himself. Everything we know about the artist and the man makes it highly improbable that he would have based the most important artistic decision of his life on such a facile gesture of intellectual defiance. Yet I believe that this story nonetheless offers us an important clue to the development of Porter's art—and, indeed, to the very nature of his art.

The encounter in de Kooning's studio would have taken place in 1947 or 1948, approximately ten years after the Vuillard exhibition in Chicago. We may thus wonder why, if Vuillard's "revelation of the obvious" struck Porter with such force in 1938, it took him the better part of a decade to act upon it in his own work. In 1938 Porter was thirty-one years old—still a "young" artist by the standards of the day, but not exactly an unformed youth. There were no economic obstacles to be overcome, and his sense of vocation seems to have been reasonably secure—as secure, anyway, as it can ever be in an artist who has not yet discovered his forte. He was gifted, intelligent, independent, and knowledgeable, and ambitious enough to be on the lookout for a viable point of entry into the art of his time. If he felt he had found it in Vuillard, how are we to account for this protracted delay in his development?

The truth is, I believe, that Porter found only part of what he was looking for in his experience of what Mr. Moffett describes as "Vuillard's conservatism, a respect for the wholeness, uniqueness, and presence of the world." This, to be sure, remained a necessary and indispensable term in the dialectic of Porter's mature style. But it wasn't enough to inspire that style. What Porter still lacked even after his discovery of Vuillard—and what it took him another decade to acquire—was a redefinition of the medium in which the "love of visual reality" that he shared with Vuillard could be effectively realized in unmistakably contemporary terms. It was precisely this that Porter discovered in de Kooning's paintings of the late Forties, and why de Kooning always remained a sacred figure for him—a touchstone of the age. Abstract Expressionism, at least as it was practiced by de Kooning (and Kline too, probably) supplied Porter with the kind of contemporary redefinition of the painting medium that he needed as the other term in the dialectic of his style.

Abstract Expressionism thus served Porter's artistic interests very much as Impressionism had served Vuillard's. It gave him the means of producing an art that was modern as well as traditional—for producing an art that he could somehow regard as complete. Now that we have been able to take the measure of Porter's achievement in this retrospective exhibition, we can see more clearly than ever before that what he, too, aspired to make was "something solid and durable like the art of the museums," and that it was of the relationship that he forged between Abstract Expressionism ("the love of the medium") and his own "love of visual reality" that he made it. He was not alone in this ambition, of course. Many of the "second generation" figurative painters in the Fifties shared the same kind of ambition. Yet Porter succeeded in a way that most of them did not, and on a larger and more consistent scale too, not only because his dependence on de Kooning was notably less abject than theirs but also—and more importantly—because he was equipped by training and experience to bring to bear on his painting a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of what "the art of the museums" actually consisted of. He was not dependent on de Kooning, as many of the younger painters were, for his notion of

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what that art was. His knowledge of it had long preceded his own ambition to produce it himself.

Oddly enough, it was Porter's independence—for he never belonged to the legion of de Kooning's imitators—that contributed to his isolation in the Fifties. He could not be considered a part of the Abstract Expressionist movement, and he could not be entirely separated from it, either. He had to wait until Abstract Expressionism had itself become as historical as Impressionism before the splendor of his stubborn individualism could be fully grasped and appreciated. Now that it has been, or at least has begun to be, we may note a further irony in Porter's situation as an artist. During all the years that he was openly acknowledging his debt to de Kooning and (as a critic) elucidating what he saw as de Kooning's special quality, he was himself emerging as a painter superior to de Kooning in achievement. That, it seems to me, is one of the things we learn from this extraordinary exhibition. Porter himself would probably have been horrified by this judgment—or maybe not: he was a proud man—but it is a conclusion that strikes me as inescapable for anyone who studies this exhibition with careful attention. Only in the last gallery of the show did Porter seem, strangely, to lose his way occasionally, either by venturing toward an Avery-ish mode of abstraction for which he had no gift or by doing just the opposite—basing his pictures on a literalism that did not suit him. Otherwise, the exhibition moved from strength to strength with a consistency and eloquence that were overwhelming.

Make no mistake: after this exhibition, the history of American painting is going to have to be rewritten to give Fairfield Porter a larger place than he has heretofore been granted. He is going to have to be recognized as one of the classics of our art. For myself, though as a critic I had praised Porter's work on a number of occasions during the last twenty years and thought I knew it well, I found I was not really prepared for what I found in this exhibition, either. For a critic it is a very odd experience to praise an artist's work over a long period of time and then discover, as I did in Boston, that I had actually underrated it. For at least one visitor, that too made this exhibition a truly extraordinary event.

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The Bard and company

by David Paul

What humiliations he must have endured, to be so given to playing the buffoon!
—Nietzsche

Others abide our question, thou art free. We ask and ask, thou smilest . . .
—Matthew Arnold

And last but not least to be mentioned, Mr. William Shakespeare.
—John Webster

By the time his brief career as a playwright was drawing to an end, poor Thomas Kyd had much to be sorry for—and ashamed of. Son to a "gentleman," a London scrivener ever anxious to improve his status in life, he had been given a sound education at the new Merchant Tailors School which would have fully qualified him for following in his father's tracks. Instead, he strayed into literature, perpetrated a play (carefully based on the Senecan pattern), and it proved a resounding success. In fact *The Spanish Tragedy,* or "Hieronimo" as it came to be called, was probably the most often produced and reprinted of any play of the age, from the 1580s on into the Jacobean era. In 1601 it even appeared with additions by another hand—to which he could make no objection, having been miserably dead for seven years. While alive, he had seen to it that his name never appeared on any of the printings, so much so that the practice continued after his death, and even in the eighteenth century there were doubts about the identity of its author. There are none now. The play is of a piece (if the most notable piece) with the rest of his writing.

Among the famous plays of the period it is the least revivable, thanks to the mechanical dullness of the verse, and the labored, rhetorical tropes that load it. But the plot, given careful management, left the players every opportunity for tearing a passion to tatters. Success bred the kind of affectionate ridicule that adopts tags for quotation at any turn (they appear in a number of later plays), and years after its first appearance Ben Jonson grumbled that there were still those who would swear by "Hieronimo" in spite of all the progress the theater had made since—which suggests that some admirers were positively addicts who would sit through a new performance waiting for their favorite moments, for the famous tirade which they knew by heart and could spout in time with the player, correcting him vociferously if he made a slip or muffed a favorite line. And besides all this, the play, being the success it was, might well invite envy and personal attack. Who *was* this nonentity who dared to score such an outstanding if slightly ridiculous triumph? We can learn that from Thomas Nashe. In the preface to *Menaphon,* a posthumous work by his late and lamentably ended comrade-in-letters, Robert Greene, he launches into a characteristic diatribe, apropos of theater, against a certain

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ill-advised intruder into that world of precarious living, rabid rivalries, and unholy dying:

> It is a common practise now-a-daies, amongst a set of shifting companions, that runne through every art and thrive by none, to leave the trade of Noverint, whereto they were borne, and busie themselves with the indevors of art, that could scarcely latinize their neck-verse if they should have neede; yet English Seneca read by candle-light yieldes many good sentences . . . and if you intreat him faire of a frosty morning, he will affoord you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of tragical speeches. But O griefe! *tempus edax rerum,* what's that will last alwaies? The sea exhaled by droppes will in continuance be drie, and Seneca let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needes die to our stage, which makes his famisht followers to imitate the Kidde in Aesop who, enamoured with the Foxes newfangles, forsooke all hopes of life to leape into a new occupation . . .

Nashe's dancing prose is a wonderful contrast to Kyd's flatfoot verse, but the studiously random-seeming archery of his invective nevertheless hits its mark. Researchers have found no such fable in Aesop as that of the kid and the fox, which makes the purpose of introducing the term "Kidde" unmistakable.

From his own point of view Kyd was a gentleman. If the lure of the playhouse could not be resisted, it must not be publicly admitted to—hence the anonymity of all the printings of his rapidly notorious play. Nashe, like his late comrade Greene, was a university man. Thomas Kyd was not. A university man, a scholar, might dare to live by his wits and risk the consequences. He had the prestige of learning behind him, and the possibility of patronage, protection, from influential quarters, whereas Kyd was one of those who'd dared to "leave the trade of Noverint, whereto they were borne" and busy themselves with arts for which they were not qualified. *Noverint* ("Be it known") was the standard opening word to most of the Latin screeds which were the daily work of scriveners. From Nashe's point of view, the best of learning possessed by such a person as Kyd would be scrivener's dog-Latin. A scapegrace gentleman from university might deign to dabble in writing for the playhouse, but for a scrivener to aspire to such a thing was damnable presumption, made only the more heinous when attended by success.

Who were the others among this set of "shifting companions"—i.e., outsiders, interlopers? There may not have been many, for Nashe uses a sort of multiplying irony and sprays his satirical target to make sure of his mark. One other there certainly was, but he had already been dealt with by Robert Greene himself. Greene belonged to that not unfamiliar type in the writing world, the wild and roistering bullyboy with a slender and graceful talent, consequently prone to jealousy of a broader and more successful aptitude than his own. In his posthumous *Groat's Worth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance,* published in 1592, he included a famous letter of warning to his compeers who wrote for the playhouse against the ingratitude of the players themselves, especially one of their number:

> an upstart Crowe, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tyger's heart wrapped in a player's hide, supposes he is well able to bombast out a blank verse with the best of you, and being an absolute Johannes Factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in the Country.

Here the target, if only half named, is equally unmistakable. And again the invective is prompted by the success of its object, this upstart, no university man but a mere *player,* a nobody in fact, come from the country, who had started work in the playhouse at some menial level. (The statement that his first connection with it was the task of holding horses' heads outside the building, for visitors who came on horseback, sounds too improbable to be mere inven-

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tion.) By way of acting in small parts he had progressed to mending and rewriting other people's dramatic efforts, "beautifying himself with our feathers," and thanks to his popularity with fellow players he had arrived at a position where, to a jealous eye, he could be called an "absolute Johannes Factotum." Poor Robert Greene's resentment has obviously jaundiced the portrait, but how much otherwise unrecorded hostility does it represent?

It is more than mere coincidence that made Greene and Nashe direct their shafts at Shakespeare and Kyd. A third playwright, the brilliantly precocious Marlowe, had, with *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*, scored more success than either. But no such attacks were made on him. He was no "shifting companion," no upstart, but a fellow scholar, a university man like themselves. In the same invective letter Greene issued warnings to two of these fellows of his: to one, a "famous gracer of tragedians" to *beware of atheism*; to the other, a "young Juvenal," to avoid getting enemies by bitter words. As events were to prove, these could only be Marlowe and Nashe.

Catastrophe was in fact rapidly on its way to two of this so far successful trio, and in each case it came by a sudden, indirect, and surprising route. London was a continually growing metropolis and had its settlers from abroad. These too went on accumulating: tradesmen from the Netherlands in particular found it profitable to settle in England. It offered a sense of security from the Spanish-Catholic threat to their own country, and a market for their wares. Some of their communities were long enough established to have their own schools, churches, and cemeteries. Inevitably they aroused resentment among some of the native population, and xenophobia was sharpened by a more practical grievance: these strangers were encroaching on or stealing the natives' livelihood. There were riots, demonstrations, continual threatenings of further trouble—a police problem without a solution. Who fomented the riots? One night a set of ugly doggerel rhymes was stuck up on the wall of the Dutch settlement, warning the residents of what might happen if they did not go home. The police mind, then as now, worked at clues in its own literal way. Rhymes! Some poet must be guilty! And where were poets of the lower, more scurrilous sort to be found if not in the purlieus of the playhouse? Searches must be made. As a possible source of those rhymes, a room shared for working purposes by two such men, one Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marley or Marloe, was raided. No anti-Dutch rhymes or their like were found, but something even worse: handwritten passages from an "atheistical tract." This could be a hanging matter!

It is clear that the two men were associates and not friends. They happened to be writing for the same company of players. As Kyd was to write later:

> My first acquaintance with this Marlowe rose upon his bearing name to serve my Lord, although this Lord never knew his service but in writing for his plaiers, for never could my L. endure his name or sight when he had heard of his conditions, nor would indeed the form of divine prayers, used daily in his Lps. house, have quadred with such reprobates . . . . That I should love or be familiar friend with one so irreligious were very rare . . . besides he was intemperate and of a cruel hart, the very contraries to wch. my greatest enimies will say of me.
>
> It is not to be numbred amongst the best conditions of men to tax or to upbraide the dead . . . . But thus much have I dared in the greatest cause, which is to cleare myself of being thought an Atheist, which some will sweare he was.

But the "atheistical writings" had been found shuffled in among Kyd's papers. He may have been present when the raid was carried out, Marlowe not. He was arrested, on May 12, 1593, and carried off to Bridewell prison where the instructions of the commissioners with regard to any suspected libelers (of the Dutch) were carried out with as much or more zest upon a sus-

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pected atheist: "all that after due examination be suspected and refuse to confess the truth are to be put to the torture in Bridewell, that by its extremity (to be used as often as the Commissioners deem necessary) they shall be drawn to discover their knowledge." How long Kyd was put to the torture and kept in prison we do not know, but he was released without any charge. He emerged a broken creature, utterly alone it would seem, and helpless. All we know of his misfortunes is in the above-quoted letter of appeal (evidently written some time after Marlowe's violent death in a tavern brawl at Deptford on May 30, 1593) written to the then Lord Keeper, Sir John Puckering, pleading for his intercession with Kyd's late employer, the unnamed lord in whose service he had been for six years, and for whose company of players Marlowe too had been engaged to write. The letter, undated, was discovered among State papers more than three hundred years after Kyd's death, with no record or evidence of a reply. In it Kyd reveals that the lord who had employed him fully believed in his innocence of the charge which had sent him to Bridewell, but even so could not afford to risk renewing his services. The slur remained, and would be irremovable.

There is no mention of his family or parents, though it would not have been unusual for a man's family, when he was unjustly charged, to put in pleas for him with authority. If Kyd's parents viewed him as a castaway, which is what he felt himself to be to judge from the tone of his letter, then his misfortunes were a consequence of the way of life he had willfully chosen. He now made shift to do what he could, and this was largely in the way of translations, notably a blank verse version of Garnier's *Cornélie*. He could put his name to this, along with a hopefully dedicatory epistle, as it was obviously and irreproachably a closet play, meant for reading, not the playhouse. But what he calls his "bitter times and privy broken passions" must have ended in 1594, a short time before December 30, when his father published a declaration, in good scrivener's Latin, wherein and at some length "Francis and Anna Kyd renounce the burden of administration, together with all right, title and interest in the goods, rights and properties of their deceased son Thomas . . . and do this expressly and absolutely." This might be claimed to be simply a means of disclaiming all liabilities Thomas had left behind him, but the tone implies more. The slur which Thomas's late employer could not risk must be removed as emphatically as possible from his parents' name. It seems certain that Kyd, who had been exposed and ridiculed by his "superiors" in the writing world, had been cut off by his family as a consequence of his entering that world.

But if Kyd had been released from prison and torture without any further charge, his plea that the "atheistical papers" were none of his must have been accepted. Which left them to Marlowe's account. And against Marlowe a cloud of witness had already gathered. Clearly, Marlowe was by temperament a daredevil. The confidence of genius seems to have prompted a certain hubris. The will to shock, to overwhelm an audience in his plays was carried into his daily conversation in company. He went far beyond the sober, rationalist approach to established Christian doctrine which was a secret fashion of the time, notably with Raleigh and his intimates. For Marlowe, Christ was not only the son of a carpenter and no virgin birth: he was also the lover of the beloved disciple John. The homosexuality ostentatious enough in *Edward II* and *Hero and Leander* was flourished in his talk: they that "loved not tobacco and boies" were contemptible fools. Homosexuality was obviously as common then as it is now, or any time since, and within a few years the next monarch, James I, was to make no great secret of his preferences. But its practice was still in law a capital crime. And allied with atheism! As recently as 1589 one Francis Kett, a former fellow of what was then called Benet College in Cambridge (at which Marlowe himself had been a student, graduating only a few years before) was tried for atheism and burnt to death at Norwich, though the arti-

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cles of accusation imply that he was not an atheist, but a Socinian. This rationalist approach to official Christian doctrine was clearly active in private circles, ranging from Raleigh and his friends to certain quarters in Cambridge, and Marlowe had personal connections with both. But to flaunt such "blasphemies" and festoon them with gibes and jokes was to invite the rack, scaffold, or stake. Articles of accusation regarding "many vile and horrible blasphemies concerning Christ and his Mother" and maintaining "that he would persuade men to atheism into every company where he cometh" were laid before the Queen's Council on May 26, 1593, four days before Marlowe was to die from a stab wound, in a quarrel of his own making. This could well have been a merciful release from a much worse fate.

How would he have behaved under questioning? It is hard not to feel that Marlowe, like a much later dramatist, wanted to carry his genius into his life: he had the itch to tempt fate, defy the rules, and single himself out as the challenger. Would his defiance have continued under questioning, with all or more than all that had been involved in the case of Thomas Kyd? Even recantation, in the face of such evidence, would have entailed punishment, torture, prison. It is anachronistic to suppose that the retrospective glow of genius would have had any influence in the eyes of authority. Before the law, civic and religious, he was a shoemaker's son from Canterbury, graduate of Cambridge, and a writer of plays for that haunt of dubious repute, the public theater. Even the secret channel of influence which some have supposed he had with authority would have been of no use. In the face of such flagrant evidence not Cecil, not the Queen herself could have moved to save him.

As for the third in this trio, the "upstart Crowe," by the end of 1594 he was the sole survivor. He must have known more of their character and circumstances than we do, and he must have felt their fate, and the public notice it incurred, deeply, as it reflected on his own lot. Unlike them he was both playwright and player—which might involve a double slur—but clearly he had already learned both dignity and discretion. Greene's posthumous attack must be countered. He did so verbally, not in print, by remonstrating with Henry Chettle, who had seen the book into print. Chettle, though very much a mixer in the world of the playhouse, a collaborator, editor, and general factotum, had never met the object of Greene's diatribe until now. In his printed apology he records his surprise at what the "upstart" was really like:

> . . . whom at the time I did not so much spare as since I wish I had . . . . that I did not I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanor no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes; besides divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty and his facetious grace in writing that approves his art.

Evidently a gentleman, in the literal not the class sense of the word. But the two images—the sick and malevolent distortion of poor Greene's dying invective, and its startlingly unlike counterpart, Chettle's direct impression of the living individual—represent the two extremes that were never to be reconciled in Shakespeare's lifetime. "Gentle" is the word that became habitual with those who knew him, either personally or by intimate report. That was a matter of both disposition and choice; in a world where such disasters had overtaken Marlowe and Kyd, discretion was a condition of survival. But the outer shell of "reputation" remained unbreakable. He was to be Shakespeare the player all his life. Rage, bitterness would go into the plays, but any personal expression of such feelings, though it spills over into the pirated sonnets, was never to appear by his own intention in print.

At least one attempt was made to escape from the stigma of being a "player" to the dignity of being a poet, with a patron. At a time when Shakespeare was already earning

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his livelihood from the playhouse, and incurring jealousy thereby, he produced two long narrative poems which bore no stigma of the stage. The general view—since Victorian times at least—is that such was the creative ebullience of Shakespeare in these earlier years that when the playhouses were shut down because of the incidence of plague, his inventive energy had to find outlet in poems and produced *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece.* But not only are these poems task-works, bearing a certain reek of effort, with their dutiful tropes and endless elaboration of baroque conceits, they are the only works which he published with the hopeful flourish of a dedication to a lord. Patronage, for the poet, unless he had wealth and rank of his own, was an absolute essential. It was Sir Philip Sidney's patronage of Spenser which led on to that of the Queen, thanks to which the poet became a royal servant, with rank and salary. We know the misery and ultimate tragedy which his service in Ireland involved, but his exterior reputation was no way affected. His funeral was a momentous occasion, attended with honors that certainly did not attend those of Marlowe, Kyd, or Shakespeare. For the poet, an influential and titled patron was a means to security and a certain degree of reflected rank. Unfortunately for him, Shakespeare had hit on the wrong patron. Henry Wriothesley, the twenty-one-year-old Earl of Southampton, was never liked by the Queen, incurred her marked displeasure by his precipitate marriage to a seven-months-pregnant bride, and was to achieve complete disgrace by his rash support of the Earl of Essex's rebellion in 1601. He was to stand side by side with Essex on trial for treason and mutiny. His plea for pardon, supported by Essex, was proffered "with such sweet favour and winning expressions, and such ingenuous modesty that he moved the hearts of all the standers-by to pity," and ultimately secured remission of the death sentence, and a spell in the Tower.

If both his narrative poems were published with a dedicatory flourish, why did Shakespeare not attempt the same thing with one of his early plays? The question itself is an anachronism. A play written for public performance in the playhouse was not an acceptable thing to dedicate to a lordship, not at this stage in the early 1590s. An ambitious courtier might keep a company of players to be known by his name. This was always a useful card to play at court, where an entertainment might any time be needed at short notice for one occasion or another. After all, when the Puritan fathers of the city council decreed, in 1586, that the playhouse must be expelled from the City and its environs, it was saved only by the court's stepping in. Unlike many a ducal court in Italy, it could not afford to retain a troupe of players of its own. But it did not choose to be without them. And so a situation that was always precarious was at least maintained in that position. The playhouse, and the actor and playwright, survived on two sources of livelihood: a general public at the playhouse and, on the other hand, the court, whenever it was summoned to perform at a hall of the court's choosing. Ideally a play would be aimed at pleasing both audiences, but regularly to entertain and please the court was a condition of survival.

But hostility to plays and playhouses on the part of public authority persisted throughout the reign and beyond. Nashe, that master of invective journalism, launches into a diatribe against those that "rail upon playing," in *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Divell,* printed in 1593. But the "railers" would have found his defense more than dubious. "The policy of playing is very necessary for a State, since those that are their own masters (as, Gentlemen of the Court, the Inns of Court, captains and soldiers), needs must spend their afternoons upon pleasure, either gaming, following of harlots, drinking, or seeing a play, of which the last is the least evil." But to the civic authorities it was an evil that could incorporate many of the others.

In 1597, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London petitioned the Queen's Privy Council "For the present stay and final

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suppression of stage plays at the Theatre, Curtain, Bankside and all other places" because they corrupt youth with "unchaste matters and ungodly practices . . . contrary to the rules and art prescribed for them even among the heathen, who used them seldom, at set times and not all the year long." And moreover "they are the ordinary places for vagrant persons, masterless men, thieves, horse-stealers, whore-mongers, cozeners and other dangerous persons to meet together and make their matches." Then again "they maintain idleness, and draw prentices and other servants from their work"; and in time of plague, "many having sores and yet not heartsick take occasion to walk abroad and hear a play, whereby others are infected." In response to this appeal, the Privy Council ordered the prohibition of all plays during that summer (when infection was supposed to be most rampant) anywhere within three miles of the city, and likewise ordered the magistrates "to send for the owners of the playhouses and enjoin them to pluck down quite the stages, galleries and rooms, and so deface them that they may not again be employed to such use." Four years earlier the Council had expressed concern that the students at the two universities should not be exposed to "things that may allure and entice them to lewdness, folly, and riotous manners" and with this in view had ordered that "no plays or interludes of common players be set forth either in the University or any place within the compass of five miles."

In spite of all these deterrents, the playhouse persisted and even throve against the odds. Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men, led by a shrewd actor-manager, consolidated its position to a degree where, on James Stuart's accession to the English throne in 1603, he saw fit at once to promote the company to his own personal service, renaming it the King's Men, with the right (or duty?) to take part in royal state processions, wearing a scarlet livery. To Shakespeare's mind, the irony of this distinction can be guessed from a line or two in one of the more cryptic sonnets: "Were it aught to me I bore the canopy, With my extern the outward honouring?" It was the highest honor he received in his lifetime.

Meanwhile, in the late 1590s, the ranks of the playwrights had acquired a new and forceful recruit. Nine years junior to Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, posthumous child of a Lowland Scots father whose widow married a bricklayer, had a rougher start in life. He escaped apprenticeship to his stepfather's trade, being bright and industrious enough to be sent to Westminster School. But in his teens he was already serving as a soldier with the army of William of Orange against the Spanish in Flanders. Back in London at nineteen he married, not happily. His wife, he remarked in later years, was "a shrew, but honest." After she had borne him three children, they parted. How he made shift to support himself and family isn't clear. He entered the world of theater at the lowest end, as a traveling player, tramping by the wagonload of props, reciting such plays as "Hieronimo" in barns and inn yards. He surfaces as a playwright with *The Isle of Dogs,* a satire which he and Nashe concocted between them in 1597. It was instantly withdrawn as scurrilous on its first performance, and those responsible, including the authors, were sentenced to prison. Nashe did a disappearing trick, to the wilds of Norfolk. Jonson, with others, served a three-month sentence.

So by the time he was twenty-four Jonson had done his share of living and learning. His later career was to be a shrewdly learned object lesson in how to project oneself, how to get on, to fight for and win personal respect for one's work and self, in a world where condescension was the lot of the writer—especially the playwright—and even more of the actor. The latter trade he quickly gave up. He armored himself with learning, he put it about that he had been to Cambridge, though there is no other record of this, he sought and found patronage, always protesting a manly independence. He dedicated his plays to persons of influence and added prefaces indicating the learning

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and labor that had gone into them. By the age of forty he had his plays published in collected form—and a contemporary wag remarked, significantly, "While others call them plays, *he* calls them works." Like Bernard Shaw, in a different way and day, he set out to be the walking, talking advertisement for himself and his writings. The embodiment of professional jealousy, his later talk included next to nothing favorable to his contemporaries, if they had real merit. Middleton, who in his tragedies achieved something beyond Jonson and was fully his equal in city comedy, was dismissed as "a low fellow." Thomas Dekker was an outright knave: he had retaliated against Jonson's barbed satire *The Poetaster,* in 1601, with a direct assault on Ben in *Satiro-Mastix*: the portrait of Jonson as the poet Horace gives us a shrewd close-up of how assiduous he was in practicing the art of self-promotion. "Horace" is awarded a crown of nettles and made to promise that

> henceforth he shall not swear to hang himself if he think any man, woman or child can write better plays or rhymes than himself, nor sit in a gallery when his comedies have entered their actions, and there make vile and bad faces at every line to make gentlemen have an eye to him, nor, when the play is ended, to exchange courtesies and compliments with the gallants in the Lord's rooms, to make all the house rise up and cry "That's Horace, that's he that pens and purges humors"; nor, when he sups in a tavern among his betters shall he dip his manners in too much sauce, nor at table fling epigrams, emblems or play-speeches about him to keep out of danger of the shot.

There is a strong tradition that Shakespeare read Jonson's first fully fledged comedy, *Every Man in his Humour,* and was instrumental in having his company put it on, which they certainly did in 1598, with Shakespeare as one of the actors. If so, Ben can scarcely be accused of much gratitude in the prologue which he wrote for the play's performance and printed with the text in the folio of his collected works in 1614. Here he casts a jaundiced eye over the plays of the recent past, including those exploiting "Yorke and Lancaster's long jarres"—which would go for the three Henry VI plays *and* for *Richard III*—and continues:

> He rather prays you will be pleas'd to see
> One such, today, *as other plays should be,*
> Where neither Chorus wafts you ore the seas,
> Nor creaking throne comes down, the boys to please,
> Nor nimble squib is seene, to make afeard
> The gentlewomen, nor roul'd bullet heard
> To say, it thunders, nor tempestuous drumme
> Rumbles, to tell you when the storme doth come,
> *But deedes and language such as men do use . . .*

(my italics) and he concludes trenchantly with a hope to the audience that

> You, that have so grac'd monsters, may like men.

Clearly, the young Jonson saw himself as the new broom that would sweep away the cobwebs, the revolutionary realist who would make plays that mirrored the times. "Monsters" became his favorite word for everything in plays that seemed to him unnatural, childish, or absurd—ghosts, fairies, far-fetched plots, and far-sought settings. "Here be no monsters, no Calibans" he reassures the reader in a preface to one of his masques. It is a cruel irony that *The Tempest* alone has been more studied, performed, re-edited, reprinted, reinterpreted, and adapted or imitated in the past thirty years than all of Jonson's plays over the past three centuries.

Unfortunately for Jonson's realism, his psychology, his characterization, is based on a classifying system of "humors" or human temperaments which had its origin in the Middle Ages, and seems the reverse of realistic today. His topicality, in the city comedies, can need armfuls of notes to be intelligible. Throughout his plays, women characters have scant room. As a whole, they can be dismissed as tersely as he did his wife.

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Even he, in his greatest play, *Volpone,* had to move the scene "ore the seas" to Venice, which releases it from some elements of topicality; and even this play, like *The Alchemist,* is bottom-heavy with a weightiness that was both natural to him and deliberately emphasized. Weightiness, like learning, is an essential part of his chosen image. He carries both into the two Roman plays, *Sejanus* and *Catiline,* written after the appearance of *Julius Caesar,* and quite expressly designed as a warning, an object-lesson to such as would embark on grand Roman themes, with nothing to support their enterprise beyond a reading of Plutarch in an English translation. Jonson has read all the sources, Tacitus, Pliny, Seneca, Suetonius in the original, and furnishes footnotes in Latin to show where they support the text of his play. The result, however well founded on the classical sources, and for all the skill and strength of the verse, is readable only with increasing effort. The impressive quality of the writing is curiously defeated by the continuous *will* to be impressive throughout. But there is no doubting that Ben Jonson felt these Roman plays to be exemplary and vastly superior to *Julius Caesar,* that omni-reflexive, unbearably hackneyed play, which still carries so much relevance where Jonson's two plays tend only to reflect themselves and their author. His resentful sense of rivalry with the older playwright persisted and rankled throughout his life; no record of compliment or praise from him until seven years after Shakespeare's death, when the first folio appeared and Jonson contributed a handsome eulogy, though even then he had to roll out the learning:

> to honour thee I would not seeke
> For names; but call forthe thund'ring
> Aeschilus,
> Euripides and Sophocles to us,
> Paccuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead,
> To life againe, to heare thy buskin tread
> And shake a stage: Or, when thy Sockes
> were on,
> Leave thee alone, for the comparison
> Of all that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome
> Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
> Triumph, my Britaine thou hast one to show
> To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.

Having done this duty, and resoundingly, Ben felt free in later conversations to harp on the faults: Shakespeare was wanting in art, learning, knowledge of the Ancients. And he had his excesses: he "had an excellent Phantasie, brave notions, and gentle expressions: wherein he flow'd with that facility, that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped . . . . His wit was in his own power: would the rule of it had been too." Shakespeare, in short, had no self-criticism. But *Romeo and Juliet,* comparatively early in his career, was extensively rewritten, and invariably improved in the process. And it is about the same play that we have the one recorded remark of Shakespeare's on any of his works—"If I had not killed Mercutio he would have killed me"—which has mystified commentators from Dryden onward. How could the creator of Richard III, Othello, Macbeth, have found anything so formidable in Mercutio? But the remark comes from within the strategy and stresses involved in the shaping of a play. Mercutio is the perfect ironic foil to his already love-prone comrade. But in himself, in his lines, he represents all the fanciful cadenzas, the verbal side kicks, the punning inconsequences that obviously tempted the poet's own indulgence but must be kept in check, or even suppressed, above all in this the playwright's first mature tragedy. Mercutio's function as foil and comic relief is ended as the tragic action gets under way.

So much for not having the "rule" of his own wit. And it seems to me Mercutio is not the only figure who has to be emblematically sacrificed. Later the poet was to kill another aspect of himself as dramatist in the person of Polonius. Polonius is the last in that long line of sage commentators who people the early history plays and comedies and provide the wise saws and instances: "Lowliness is young ambition's ladder," "All places that the eye of heaven visits / Are to a wise man ports and happy havens," "All the world's a

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stage . . ." Polonius's commonplaces are pithier than many that went before, and like them were a principal item in what the nineteenth century called "The Beauties of Shakespeare." Yet Polonius is a target for Hamlet's vicious contempt. After all, isn't he a harmless old busybody, verbally a wiseacre if a fool in action? But he epitomizes the cut-and-dried "wisdom" which the author, in the person of Hamlet, can no longer tolerate.

To try to see the plays from within, the problems entailed by plot and action in their creation and performance, produces very different results from the traditional scholarly conclusions. *Macbeth,* we are always told, is shorter than *Lear* or *Hamlet,* so the text must be based on a shortened reporter's or actor's copy. But clearly the problem for the playwright was how to sustain and stretch it out to something like the standard length. No play moves at quite so feverish a pace—a pace that might seem more appropriate to the libretto of an opera than to the movement of spoken drama. Time on stage is a very different proposition from actual time. It stretches or contracts according to the spectator's reactions, but there are decided limits to how far it can be manipulated. In *Macbeth,* from the moment when Lady Macbeth appears and reads the letter from her husband to the point where, after the murder, the knocking at the gate is heard, the action is continuous from dusk until dawn of the next day. Tension built up and sustained so long carries the risk of collapsing into bathos, and raises the problem of how to bring about an acceptable transition—a change in tempo and a break in time. The play resorts to the desperate remedy of avoiding accidental bathos by invoking it deliberately, with the drunk porter's monologue. It would have the first-time advantage of the unexpected, it would move at a sleepwalking pace, and it emphasizes the contrast between the fuddled, sleepy, normal world of every day (or every night) and the hallucinated clarity and horror of what has just happened. And it serves as well as it can the function of making time pause, and pass slowly, before the discovery of the murder and the outcry that follows. Later, toward the end of the play, the scene in England where Malcolm, the refugee son of Banquo, is approached with the offer of the Scottish throne once Macbeth is dispatched, is another case of filling in time, using the rather tedious and contrived device of Malcolm resisting the offer with an imaginary catalogue of the vices that make him unfit to accept. Given a more crowded plot, such a scene could have been briefly reported at second hand. And again, the clumsy scenes with Hecate, interpolated by another hand, were probably meant to fill out the length rather than treat the audience to more of the witch business.

One of the standard images of Shakespeare is of the genial man of the theater (how he must have loved his Wooden O!) always with an infallible finger on the pulse of his public, knowing exactly what was required to stir their interest, and catering as infallibly for the requirements and talents of the players of whom he was one. True enough perhaps of the early days when he was trying out his maturing skills on material ranging from farce to comedy to Senecan melodrama—the *Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, Titus Andronicus.* But by the time of *Hamlet* the picture must have changed somewhat. "See the players well bestowed," says the prince, i.e., have respect for them, give them the accommodation that is their due. Outwardly, here as elsewhere, Shakespeare pleads for the dignity of the players, their craft, and its vital service within a civilized community. But to the actors themselves, Hamlet's tone is one of gentle but specific reprimand, with a list of tricks and habits they must get rid of: spouting and sawing the air in the more serious dramatic roles, too much ad-libbing and interpolating lines of their own on the part of the comedians.

From 1600 onward, the playwright's products became less predictable and more *difficult* from the company's point of view. One play they refused altogether. *Troilus and*

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Cressida was announced for printing (which was usually done in readiness to follow stage performance) as early as 1603. Six years later it appeared at last. The title page of the first issue stating that it was "acted by the King's Majesties servants at the Globe" had to be replaced by one omitting any such reference. Clearly there had been a certain persistence on somebody's part (and whose if not the author's?) and an equal reluctance on the company's to stage the play, which they never did. It is the only single play of Shakespeare's issued in his lifetime with a prefatory note, and a fairly pointed one. It begins, "A never writer to an ever reader. Newes," and it goes on with, "here you have a new play, never stal'd with the Stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulger." The writer was evidently a friend and admirer of the author's and may be expressing a shared view of some types of playhouse audience. Like most literate contemporaries he has to bring in the classical names, comparing the play for its wit to Terence and Plautus, implying that this was what disqualified it from "being sullied with the smoaky breath of the multitude," and adds that it was being printed "against the grand possessors wills." The grand possessors, the company at the Globe, made no recorded objection, which must mean that one of their number, the author, had willed and perhaps instigated the publication.

Troilus and Cressida may well be the first tragi-comedy on record, certainly with no precedent in classical drama. It casts a deliberately jaundiced eye on the Trojan War, that archetype of all wars in the poetic record, and reduces it to what it was, ten years of squabble and bloodshed over a kidnapped woman. It works out as a deliberate, evenhanded study in human vanity, treachery, infatuation, cowardice, hypocrisy, and malevolence. More than *Hamlet* or any other play in the canon it seems loaded with the writer's mood. And it is stylistically a difficult play. Shakespeare has passed beyond the easy and total mastery of the language, and seems to be restlessly forging a new one which, particularly in the opening scenes, becomes congested with its own coining of words, its syntactical twists. The comic element is grim, and the tragic cruel.

Apart from a "happy ending" adaptation by Dryden, the play remained unperformed through the centuries: a puzzle and a stumbling block to the Shakespeare worshipper. But in the early 1960s, and coinciding with the Kennedy-Khrushchev confrontation, it finally received its due in one of the most memorable productions achieved by the Royal Shakespeare Company: the stage reduced to a sand-pit arena for confrontations and treacheries, a brilliant, classically trained comedian as the choric Pandarus, and an Achilles of "heroic" stature and stunted adolescent intelligence emerging finally as the dull epitome of evil as he presides over the slaughter of Hector by his Myrmidons.

Romantic conjecture has been fond of suggesting that the Dark Lady of the sonnets, thanks to her complexion, served as a study for Shakespeare's Cleopatra. (*Antony and Cleopatra* was another problem for the players, and a scholar has recently announced that it too was never performed by the company.) Much more decidedly the Dark Lady, the "woman coloured ill," could have been the model for "false Cressid." Poor Troilus cannot put an end to his passion, even with the certainty that Cressida has been faithless beyond contempt. The writer of the sonnets is in the same cruel predicament:

> Whence hast thou this becomming of things il,
> That in the very refuse of thy deeds
> There is such strength and warrantise of skill,
> That, in my minde thy worst all best exceeds?
> Who taught thee how to make me love thee more,
> The more I hear and see just cause of hate,...

The sonnets (which appeared in the same year as *Troilus*) offer us a heart laid bare, but every clue as to person, occasion, time, and place remains in code: so much so that one might wonder if the recipient who passed them on to the publisher or that "well-wishing" pirate himself had not removed

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any which offered unmistakable clues to these mysteries. There is no guarantee that we have all that were written; and T. Thorpe, whose dedication to Mr. W. H. is obviously designed to entice and mystify, hint and conceal, may have suppressed any sonnets which might give away facts and names too obviously. One thing seems beyond doubt: the sonnets as a whole must cover a longer period than the two or three years often assigned to them. Witness the well-known one beginning "To me, fair friend, you never can be old," celebrating the *third* anniversary of the writer's meeting with his friend, affectionate certainly, but still dominated by a sense of respect, a certain shyness. The earliest sonnets have a commissioned look—written at the request of parents who were anxious that their young son should marry and beget an heir. The latest have a sourness, passion, and disgust that might be contemporary with *Hamlet* or *Troilus*.

Shakespeare was forty-five at the time when the sonnets appeared, with twenty years' experience of his "trade" as player and playwright, and all that the latter involved in relation to printing. His "sugred sonnets among his friends" are mentioned in 1598. Like much other poetry of the time, including Donne's, they were known and privately admired in manuscript. A year or so later he is known to have complained of poems of his being pirated and printed without his knowledge. Ten years later he knew better, at his age, than to voice any complaint. It would simply magnify the offense by drawing attention to it. There is evidence that few copies of the book were circulated, and others may have been withdrawn at the source.

How deep and lasting was the shock of this exposure to the poet we can only guess. But silence must have been far from Olympian indifference. We know how Keats reacted when, staying with Leigh Hunt, a letter from Fanny Brawne was handed to him already opened. A servant had accidentally broken the seal. But that a letter from his beloved had been opened by another hand was enough to prompt instant departure. Nothing would persuade him to stay under the roof where such a thing had happened. Keats, notably in his letters, often shows a certain kinship with Shakespeare. But then consider what happened in the case of Wilde, the peacock. In his early days, when he was notorious for his dress, his aesthetics, and his epigrams, he was approached by a daily paper, *The Telegraph,* with the idea of being featured as a well-known personality. He was delighted to agree, adding with a characteristic flourish "and be indiscreet by all means!" Indiscreet they were, having contrived to secure a few letters, including some from his wife. The material was harmless and dull enough—especially when compared with the dreadful little missive to Lord Alfred Douglas about his "slim gilt soul" which was made so much of at his trial. But Wilde on this earlier occasion was extremely hurt and distressed, the more so perhaps at having got what he asked for.

In the case of the sonnets the offense was infinitely greater. It was both heinous and dangerous. A malicious finger might have pointed at one particular sonnet:

> A womans face with nature's owne hand painted,
> Hast thou the Master mistris of my passion . . .

Superficially its meaning is homosexual, it is a passionate love letter from a man to a younger man. But there is one artlessly self-revelatory detail: the beloved friend has all the charm and beauty of a woman, but then wise nature "fell a-doting," adding "*one thing to my purpose nothing.*" The burden of it is simply: if only you were the woman your beauty makes you seem!—which is the last thing a real homosexual could genuinely feel or say. Proust's great novel is, among many other things, a personally compiled encyclopedia of what he called "Sodome et Gomorrhe," and somewhere in it he remarks that a lifelong homosexual may fall in love with a woman, and the worse for him, since his love can have no fulfillment that seems to him "natural"; and conversely a lifelong heterosexual may for once in his life fall in

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love with a member of his own sex, with the same consequences. The sonnets exhale a deep sense of loneliness. The need for affection, stalled every other way, fastens on and irradiates a single being, invests it with a mystery of all possible attributes and wonders:

> What is your substance, whereof are you made,
> That millions of strange shadoes on you tend?
> Since every one, hath every one, one shade,
> And you but one, can every shaddow lend.

In the same sense Keats, in the depths of illness, saw all possible desire and fulfillment in the one being of his fiancée, Fanny Brawne—or the aging Beethoven, in the abyss of deafness, concentrated all his need to give and receive affection on his puzzled nephew, and all his jealousy on the boy's mother.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century onward scholars began the task of sifting the dust of archives, law records, parish registers, in search of every possible grain of evidence concerning the man who had been so little noted in his lifetime. They read the sonnets, and almost unanimously passed them over in silence. They were too much—and too little; somehow beyond scholarly discussion. They gave no facts, dates, details of where the poet was living. But they do give some unambiguous indications of what the poet felt about his trade, his position in the world.

> When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes,
> I all alone beweepe my out-cast state,
> And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
> And look upon myself, and curse my fate . . . .

He wrote such lines as these from experience, and he meant them. He can also be more temperate, but more specific:

> O for my sake doe you with fortune chide,
> The guiltie goddesse of my harmfull deeds,
> That did not better for my life provide
> Than publick meanes which publick manners breeds.
> Thence comes it that *my name receives a brand,*
> And almost thence my nature is subdu'd
> To what it workes in, like the Dyer's hand.

The dusty records finally did turn up something that gives us a tantalizing picture of where and how this man with the branded name lived and lodged, in mid-career. In May 1612, one Stephen Belott brought a suit against his father-in-law Christopher Mountjoy for the dowry he had undertaken and failed to pay on Belott's marriage to Mountjoy's daughter. One William Shakespeare, gentleman, now resident at Stratford-upon-Avon, "aged 48 years or thereabouts," who had lain, i.e., lodged at Mountjoy's house in 1604, was called as witness and testified that Belott, then a servant to Mountjoy, "did well and honestly behave himself in his service"; that Mrs. Mountjoy approved of Stephen Belott, wanted him as a son-in-law, and was evidently familiar enough with the lodger Shakespeare to ask his good offices in persuading Belott to the marriage, which, after "many conferences amongst themselves," was finally "consummated and solemnized" in 1604; he further testified that the defendant had certainly promised a marriage portion, but what sum he could not recall, and had no recollection of the defendant having promised to leave his daughter two hundred pounds in his will.

A preeminent Shakespeare authority, E. K. Chambers, has deduced from this that the poet "was then of failing memory"—at forty-eight! But why after eight years should a man with so many preoccupations remember the precise facts and figures of a case that had no personal interest for him, and which could only remind him, now that he was safely installed in his own residence at Stratford, of times and conditions which he did not care to remember? Some clearer deductions can be made. Since he testified in 1612 that he had known Mountjoy and Belott for about ten years, the obvious inference is that he had lodged with the household since 1602, a sufficiently familiar mem-

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ber of it for Mrs. Mountjoy to feel after two years' acquaintance that he would be kind, reliable, and persuasive enough to help in her marriage plans for her daughter.

Mountjoy was a Huguenot refugee who had settled in London in the 1590s as a tiremaker, a designer of women's headdresses, a vital element in the fashions of the day. Belott too was French. So the case was referred for settlement to the elders of the Huguenot church in London, who awarded twenty nobles to Belott and noted that both he and Mountjoy were "desbauchés"—men of licentious life. So this was the kind of household that was raffish, prosperous, and "foreign" enough to accommodate a player without any sense of incurring a social slur. And however loose his life, Mountjoy, tight with money (the twenty nobles were still unpaid a year after the award), found it useful to have a paying guest who was affable enough to have friendly relations with the whole family. Affability would be the best protection for reserve, for securing peace and quiet, and freedom from inquisitiveness perhaps.

We have another intimate glimpse, on the professional side. John Aubrey, that assiduous if feckless searcher-out of anecdotes about past worthies, managed to unearth an aged actor whose father, Christopher Beeston, had also been an actor in Shakespeare's company, then called the Chamberlain's Men, in 1598. From this man Aubrey learned that "Shakespeare was the more to be admired" (i.e., wondered at) because he was not a company-keeper, "lived at that time in Shoreditch," wouldn't be debauched, and if invited he would write that he was "in paine." There is a distinctly factual and personal ring in this. If Shakespeare had been a company-keeper, given to talking himself up like Marlowe or Jonson, some records would remain. As an actor among actors he would have company enough during rehearsing and performing hours. Outside those he had motive enough for solitude, working on the plays, searching out plot material, sheltering a continual sense of humiliation—and two years-long tormenting love relationships.

What life was like then is hard to recapture. We have lost the quality of night as it must have been even in a "great" city—always impressive to foreign visitors—like London: a walled city of less than a hundred thousand people but enclosing within it many gardens, waste spaces, and open deposits of sewage. Rotting heads of exemplary traitors and criminals, exposed on spikes, were a not uncommon sight. And there were the long, dark, candlelit winters. Jonson gives us a glimpse of the writer at work on his plays:

> Things that were born when none but the still night
> And his dumb candle saw his pinching throes.

Winters were hard, and several times during the 1590s and the following decade the Thames froze over and stayed frozen for weeks. Thomas Nashe had a peculiar dread of the dead season:

> Short days, sharp days, long nights come on apace,
> And who shall hide us from the winter's face?
> Cold doth increase, the sickness will not cease,
> And here we lie, God knows, with little ease.
> From winter, plague, and pestilence, good Lord deliver us!

Nashe vanishes without further trace, about the year 1600. One hopes his plague-dread was not prophetic. Plague deaths often went unrecorded.

The playhouses (with one exception, The Children's Company) could function only by daylight, and had a thin time of it when midwinter darkness ate into the afternoons. Fortunately, with James's accession the demand for plays at court greatly increased, and entertainment had sometimes to be rustled up at short notice. There are numbers of notes from court officials testifying to this, and one can be taken as typical: "I have sent and bene all thys morning hunting for players, Juglers, & Such kinde of Creatures, but finde them harde to finde, wherefore Leaving notes of them to seeke me." Burbage the actor finally turned up to say

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there was no new play but they had revived an old one, *Loves Labours Lost,* which would please James's queen by its wit. Who knows, perhaps some Juglers were unearthed as well. The imperious condescension or contempt of official empty-heads like the one who wrote the above note was something to which the players had to become case hardened. With one exception? And the evidence of such an attitude, as it survives on record, is probably the mere tip of the iceberg.

To endure, and financially to make the best of it, was the only resource. In 1605 an anonymous pamphlet remarks, "Players were never so thriftie as they are now about London," and goes on to advise the actor to make his hand a stranger to his pocket, and when he finds his purse well lined let him buy some place or lordship of a manor in the country, so that his money will bring him *dignity* and *reputation.* This was the policy of Edward Alleyn, the most famous actor of his day, who never took a part in any of Shakespeare's plays. Alleyn amassed a fortune, enough for an opulent retirement, as well as to found a boy's college, on the scale of the university colleges of the day, in his name and memory. No mere playwright could come up to that. Some of Shakespeare's later plays can have earned him nothing. His income came chiefly from the proceeds of partnership, shared management in the company. But he emulated the Alleyn policy on a modest scale. From the early 1590s onward there was a steady laying by of money for investment in property, in land for revenue, and finally a place, New Place, Stratford, for residence in retirement.

He had gone away, vanished from Stratford in 1586, aged twenty-two, four years married and father of three children, and nothing whatever is known of him till he surfaces again in 1592, when he is malevolently noted by Greene as the "upstart crowe" among the players in London. He had certainly not been driven away from home by some deer-poaching exploit, since the Deer Park of the legend never even existed. He had married at eighteen, his bride being three months pregnant. The native urge to gentilify, to make the poet respectable, has prompted the suggestion that the pair had "plighted troth" and were legitimately married some months before the church ceremony. But the latter was hurried and furtive, taking place at a small village outside Stratford. The bride, one and a half times as old as her groom, would have been eminently marriageable when he was a boy of nine. "Some marriages are good," observed La Rochefoucauld; "none are delightful." This one cannot have remained long even in the first category if, after four years, the husband vanished leaving wife and children to his father's care.

At what date he reappeared in Stratford—a prodigal returned, to be forgiven?—we don't know. But from the mid-1590s onward a pattern emerges of regular goings to Stratford, whenever work in London allowed. We know from the sonnets that affections and passions lay elsewhere. But he was fond of his two surviving children, both daughters; there was a household to establish, a marriage to be made the best of—and Stratford was home, the ultimate haven. By 1610 he had taken up permanent residence there.

He had returned safe and sound, not unprosperous if far from rich, but—a player, of all things! The attitude of country gentry to the profession would be even narrower, more prone to ridicule than in the capital. It may well have been more for the sake of his family's feelings than his own that he purchased the famous coat-of-arms. The College of Arms (still subsisting today with all its panoply along with the conferment of titles) had, in James I's day, been corrupted by the king's determined practice of selling titles for cash. Five hundred new knighthoods in a year made a handsome addition to his exchequer. If the king made so free, the heralds saw no harm in doing likewise, since they could sell the title of "Gentleman," with a coat-of-arms at their own discretion, and put the fee in their own pockets. This led to fallings-out among themselves, and one of their number in 1605 denounced the Garter King of Arms

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for selling coats-of-arms to "persons not of fit station," including a hosier, a plasterer, a fishmonger, a soapmaker, and . . . "Shakespeare the player." So the *brand* remained irremovable. And Jonson could not resist a sly gibe: "I can write myself Gentleman now," says a minor character in *Every Man out of his Humour,* "Here's my pattent, it cost me thirtie pound."

The giant enigma attaching to Shakespeare resides not in the nature of the man, his life, or his works—since genius is never a probable thing—but simply in the fact that so little serious notice was taken of his works in his lifetime. We know nothing of the first production of *Hamlet* or any of his plays. Research has sifted all records for any intelligent comment, and turned up only a notebook of one Simon Forman, a maggoty-brained astrologer who in 1611 reports going to see *Macbeth* and three other plays and sums up the plots like a semiliterate, moralizing schoolboy. There were keen minds at work in the age, ranging from Gloriana herself to Raleigh, Bacon, Donne—keen but narrow minds. Perhaps the last named is the best illustration of this. Donne, a young man with the best of backgrounds, Oxford, Cambridge, and Lincoln's Inn, with his way to make, tormented by ambition and by a gift for poetry which could only get in the way of it, surveys the chances in one of his satires. Poetry he calls a disease, or a sin such as "brings dearth, and Spaniards in." As for the patronage seekers,

> . . . they who write to Lords, rewards to get,
> Are they not like singers at doores for meat?

But most wretched of all must be the playhouse poet who

> gives ideot actors meanes
> (Starving himselfe) to live by his labor'd
> sceanes;
> As in some Organ, Puppits dance above
> And bellows pant below, which them do move.

If Donne, as a young spark of the Inns of Court, ever spent an idle afternoon at the playhouse around 1593, it can hardly have been to admire the play. Though in later years he wrote a congratulatory poem, in Latin of course, for that learned and meritorious friend Ben Jonson, to be printed with his play *Volpone.* Jonson had been vociferous in his praises of two verse exercises by Donne, *The Storm* and *The Calm.* Donne's love poems, to be collected and published only after his death, circulated widely in manuscript, and were greatly admired. If they'd been pirated into print they would have done no good to his prospects of a secular career and ruined his chances of entering the church. Later, as a churchman, he felt that the itch to publish even his religious verse was unworthy: "Of my Anniversaries, the fault that I acknowledge in myself, is to have published anything in verse which, though it have excuse even in our times by men who professe and practice much gravity, yet I wonder how I declined to it, and do not pardon myself." This was simply the extreme of an attitude which had become general and which persisted into the eighteenth century and beyond. It meant that the man who lived by his pen was one who *lived by his wits,* which could only mean the shadier or the shabbier side of things.

Hogarth's print of the Distressed Poet, spreadeagled against the window of his ground-floor hovel in agonized protest at the din outside—drunken brawls, cats and dogs, street vendors—expressed the common view, like Rowlandson's drawing of the threadbare author, waiting in desperate hope while the all-important bookseller-publisher surveys his offering at a safe, arms-length distance. Swift in his letters alludes, between commiseration and contempt, to one Foe or Defoe, who *lived by his pen.* Textbook history puts the two side by side; writers of full-length fictions equally based, in their different ways, on the literature of voyages of discovery. Both were pamphleteers. Defoe was pilloried and had his ears clipped as punishment for one of his pamphlets. No such penalty could touch the

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Dean for writing *A Modest Proposal* or *Wood's Halfpence.* Swift too kept an ironic and jealous eye on the career of his school contemporary Congreve, his brilliant début as a playwright at barely twenty praised by Dryden in terms that might have greeted a Shakespeare but never did. Later in his career as an important political go-between, Swift noted Congreve waiting—and again waiting—in the anteroom of a great man for the patronage, the official sinecures, that might earn him an income. Congreve gave up the profitless and arduous business of playwriting in 1700, with the failure of his last and finest comedy. In later years, interviewed by a young visiting Frenchman, he declared that he wished to be remembered simply as a gentleman. "Would I have come all this way," asked the young Frenchman, whose name was Voltaire, "simply to see an English gentleman?" Congreve must have realized the fatuousness of such a remark, to this visitor from a different mental climate.

Across the Channel, the young Racine, irresistibly drawn to theater, had found himself to be an outcast from his eminent Jansenist family, for whom all theater was an abomination, as it was for their patron saint Augustine. But he was in receipt of a royal pension when he wrote his first play. From *Andromaque* onward his plays were a continual subject of discussion, comparison: Was he greater than his senior rival Corneille? Which lady had wept most at which play, *Bérénice, Iphigénie*? and so forth, each play prompting a debate in which court, clergy, and literary world all joined. In his retirement, a regular visitor at court, Racine was lured back into writing plays by the uncrowned queen, Madame de Maintenon, for strictly private performance by the girls in the school she had founded.

Molière's career in theater is rather closer to Shakespeare's, beginning as traveling player and furnisher of quick material for his troupe. But established in Paris, and his maturer hand producing plays like *l'Ecole des Femmes,* he became a "somebody," interesting enough to be invited into society, which found him quiet and dull—perhaps he was making notes for *Le Misanthrope.* And just as Louis XIV had laughed at Racine's only comedy, *Les Plaideurs,* at Versailles and rescued it from the failure it had been in Paris, so too Molière had much to thank the monarch for: protection from the Church's wrath against *Tartuffe,* and retrieval from bankruptcy at a late stage in his career.

In France, as in Spain and Italy, poetry and drama ranked as equal in the arts with music, painting, architecture. Not so in England. James and his son were great patrons of painting and architecture—Inigo Jones, Rubens, Van Dyke. Plays were simply for pastime. As such, if successful, they could make their way into a popularity that conferred nothing on their author. By 1607, *Hamlet* had traveled on to the high seas. One William Keeling, captain of the *Dragon,* bound with two other ships for the East Indies, notes in his log: "I invited Captain Hawkins to a fishe dinner and had *Hamlet* acted abord me, which I permitt to keepe my people from idleness and unlawful games, or sleepe."

Since the Romantic era—and popular journalism is the bastard child of Romanticism—it is always assumed that a genius must somehow be extraordinary in his life and character, in spite of the fact that Bach, Handel, Cézanne, Rembrandt, and many another led industrious and humdrum lives. Whatever the inner turmoils, the hells, the titanic struggles, outwardly Shakespeare's was a humdrum career. To my mind, his personality might have had quite a kinship with that of Verdi who, across the barrier of language, so deeply admired him. Unlike his contemporaries—Wagner the grand poseur and Berlioz the frenetic self-exponent—Verdi was the soul of reticence, terse and technical in his comments on his works, socially a "bear" as he described himself, in fact something of a recluse except for business matters: nothing in his life or character corresponds with the volcanic energy and passion that erupts in *Il Trovatore,* as it does thirty years later in *Otello.* Yet his mature operas are so often marked by a curious

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intimacy: the real climaxes seem to come where a character is alone with him- or herself—Gilda, Iago, Violetta, Filippo. And in Shakespeare there can be the same inwardness. *Hamlet, Lear,* and even *Macbeth* are in a sense dream plays: we have to identify with the protagonists, hallucinate their ordeals, though we remain outside the ordeals of jealousy, arrogance—Othello, Leontes, Coriolanus.

For Shakespeare a plot exterior to his own invention was as necessary as a libretto to an opera composer. Drama in verse and prose is as much an artifice as opera; who knows, man may have learned to sing before he began to shape words into verse forms. And Shakespeare's plays are no more realist than opera. In a sense he creates a reality without any of the prerequisites of realism, which is what annoyed Jonson and maddened Tolstoy, the arch-novelist. Several of the plays are ghost stories. The supernatural, fairies, monsters exist on the same plane of reality as the mortals. For his material, Shakespeare was always tempted by the challenge of the improbable, the farfetched. His plays take off from their time and place into a world of their own, just as opera, by its nature, has to lift its material on to a different plane. Sometimes Shakespeare chose an impossible challenge. A late play, *Cymbeline,* for all its maturity of style and handling remains in the end a farrago, thanks to its plot. But then who, reading an old wives' morality tale like the story of Lear in its early form, could have seen it as material for the greatest of tragedies?

Any comparison with opera and Verdi must invoke a drastic contrast. The greater man had by so much the less success. Verdi's first three masterpieces (voted vulgar by the cognoscenti) traveled quickly to nearly every country in Europe and the Americas. By his early forties Verdi was a man with wealth enough to invest in leisure, land, horse-breeding, charities. At the same age Shakespeare was still an actor in minor roles. And half the work he had written never saw print until the publication of the folio, seven years after his death.

Heminge and Condell, the actors entrusted with the task of preparing and publishing it, were faithful, simple souls. Their chief anxiety in the preface is that the volume should *sell* and the venture be justified. The dedication to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke and his brother is sufficiently abject—from lifelong habit, one supposes. In view of their lordships' rank, "we cannot but know their dignities greater than to descend to the reading of these trifles: and, while we name them trifles, we have deprived ourselves of the defence of our Dedication. But since you have been pleased to think these trifles something heretofore and have prosecuted both them and their author living with so much favour . . . we hope that you will use the like indulgence to them, you have done unto their parent." Their work was well and scrupulously done, with fidelity and innocence, witness their famous statement about the author: "His mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers"—a remark that was seized on with alacrity by Ben Jonson, though no one was better placed than he to know it couldn't possibly be true. Obviously the two actors had been entrusted by the author with a number of fair copies. It was his care in the first place that they should survive and be easily read. Publishing them could be left to others. He had suffered enough from that in his lifetime, witness the "diverse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors" which had appeared over the years since his career began. And even in 1623, when Heminge and Condell presented the plays "cur'd and perfect of their limbes . . . absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them," they could still be called trifles (three times over) for lordly eyes.

Has any other writer, great or small, played so much and often on the theme of *ingratitude*? It is the ground bass of *Lear, Timon of Athens, As You Like It, The Tempest,* and strikes a lingering note in some of the others, so insistent that it cannot be uncon-

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nected with personal experience, only some of which we can guess. But perhaps the supreme instance of it came comparatively late, with the ingratitude, fecklessness, and treachery which led to the printing of the sonnets. So much in them which to us remains obscure must have seemed to the writer as nakedly obvious to any eye as it was to his own. After that, the rest would be silence. There may well have been a steady practice of destroying any intimate personal document he possessed or could lay hands on. Such a policy points logically to his final message, the inscription he personally chose to have incised on his gravestone, under which, by tradition, he lies buried three fathoms deep:

> Good Frend, for Jesus sake forbeare,
> To digg the Dust enclosed Heare:
> Bleste be the Man that spares thes stones,
> And Curst be he that moves my bones.

Here and there in the plays he had always found an eloquent use for doggerel: and he *knew* this injunction would be necessary for more than one reason. It was his final word to a world that was to owe him so much and to which he owed nothing more. After all, he had lived all his life next door to—Anon.

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Literary biography
by Joseph Epstein

When I was a young man, at a time when publishers' advances were even easier to procure than divorces are now, I signed on to write a life of John Dos Passos. Why, you ask, John Dos Passos? Dos Passos himself supplied as good an answer as any when I wrote to him to ask his cooperation. "Well," he replied, "I suppose somebody's got to do it." This was my view, too, and who better than yours truly? I recall even now the joys in setting up biographical shop: acquiring all of John Dos Passos's many books, including a first edition of a book of verse entitled *A Pushcart at the Curb*; marking a folder for each year in his life, into which I planned to drop disparate, discrete, and decisive facts; buying two thick notebooks, in one of which I planned to straighten out, for my own mind and later for my biography, the chronology of my man's life, and in the other of which I planned to inscribe my own large and penetrating thoughts. I could scarcely wait to begin scribbling away.

In John Dos Passos I had, I thought, a fairly juicy subject. He was a man who had been born out of wedlock, to a sickly Southern mother and a highrolling lawyer father. This may not be a fine start for a human being but is an excellent start for a biographer. I had my opening sentence: "John Dos Passos was born a bastard but an upperclass bastard." His boyhood was spent going to an English boarding school and living in hotels with his mother. He went off to Harvard at a time when Harvard was filled with interesting people. The First World War, expatriate days in Europe, the romance with Communism, Harlan County with Dreiser, interesting marriages, a complicated relationship with Hemingway, a sharp political turn to the right (which brought about a drop in his reputation)—well, why go on? As a biographical subject Dos Passos offered everything a biographer could possibly wish for: a fine fat chance to play shrink, cultural historian, literary critic, and political pundit. I thought I could bring this baby in at just under seven hundred pages.

There was a complication, though it was an interesting one, and this was that John Dos Passos was still alive. On the one hand, I believed that biographical subjects, like most varieties of snake, were best dead, so that they couldn't charm and ultimately bite you. On the other hand, Dos Passos seemed a literarily intelligent being and therefore possibly helpful. "Writing the life of a novelist," he wrote to me, "is an impossible task. A novelist tends to use everything that happens to him, often in distorted or revamped form, so that there's nothing left for a biography." He also seemed immensely likable. Responding to some pieces that I had sent along to him with my request to do his biography, he wrote: "I'll consent to your doing this life under two conditions: (1) that you put the liberal ideology in mothballs for the duration; (2) that you promise never to use the word 'explicate' again. I like neologisms when they are use-

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ful, but doesn't 'explain' fill the bill?" Then, in longhand, he added: "Don't take my teasing too seriously, but honestly, it's a job I wouldn't care to take on," and signed off "Cordially, John Dos Passos."

Well, for a complex of reasons too elaborate to go into here, writing the biography of John Dos Passos turned out to be a job I didn't care to take on either. What is more, I am glad I did not. If I had I would have produced a volume of considerable bulk but little weight. It's composition would probably have cost me at least five and perhaps more years of my writing life. Oh, I might have uncovered a dirty secret or two—an attempt by a crazed Zelda Fitzgerald to seduce Dos Passos, a homosexual passion on his part for the young Ernest Hemingway—but the world doesn't really need many more such secrets. I do not think I would have written a very interesting book, and this would not have been John Dos Passos's fault. Roughly two years ago a book appeared perhaps not so very different from the one I might have written: *Twentieth Century Odyssey: The Life of John Dos Passos* by Townsend Ludington. A tome of 568 pages, it is in all respects a workmanlike performance—"Ideas for the new fiction Dos Passos wanted to write were growing"—yet it is also a work I never got very far in reading. In art, it is said, there are no rules, except that there are no rules. But here is one: Nobody should try to write what he himself doesn't truly wish to read.

"Funny ting, a man's life," says a character in Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer,* and the older one grows the funnier and funnier a ting it begins to seem. And few seem funnier—that is to say, odder—than the lives of literary men and women. In André Malraux's *The Walnut Trees of Altenberg,* the following bit of dialogue takes place:

> "Essentially a man is what he hides . . . ."
>
> Walter shrugged his shoulders and brought his hands together like a child making a mud pie.
>
> "A miserable little pile of secrets . . ."
>
> "A man is what he does!" my father answered sharply.

The father in that snippet of dialogue spoke for Malraux, who was interested primarily in the world's doers, the shakers and movers of history. But does it apply to the literary man? Is a literary man what he does? Or does a literary man hide his miserable little pile of secrets in those mud pies otherwise known as novels and plays and poems?

That is a question for which no clear answer is available, nor is one soon likely to be. Yet it is a real question, and it is in the hope of finding answers to it that one continues to read literary biography. Not so long ago it was not considered a pertinent question at all. The use of biography in connection with the study of literature was thought to be bad form. The literary work, it was felt, ought to be allowed to speak to its readers directly, with as little mediating interference as possible, like a direct-dial long-distance call. The New Critics, who by and large felt this way, have been somewhat maligned when the claim is made against them that they believed that literature should be studied in isolation from history and biography; as the New Critics argued in their own defense, they expected, even assumed, that scholars and serious students knew something of the history of the time in which a literary work was created and the biography of the artist who created it. But it is fair to say, even if one allows for this defense, that the New Critics did not feature the biographical aspect of literary works. The devil take the dancer, they went for the dance.

During the reign of the New Criticism, in the Forties and Fifties, the one major critic who retained an unflagging interest in the connections between biography and literature was Edmund Wilson. In his own special literary-critical program, which involved trying to capture the drama of ideas by placing them in their historical context, Wilson could scarcely avoid biography. Not, one hastens to add, that he wished to. Although he never wrote a full-dress biography, almost all Wilson's longer literary essays are

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at bottom biographical, bounding back and forth between the literary work and the forces that shaped the man or woman who created it. Because of his biographical method, Wilson was written off for a long time as a mere journalist—and what journalist isn't "mere"?—or, worse, hopelessly old-fashioned. Yet he persisted and, in two ways, prevailed. First, his own critical works, written out of this biographical impetus, remain more readable than those of any other American critic of the past half century; for it is biographical criticism that alone among all forms of literary criticism can lay claim to being a species of art. Second, though Wilson never really set out deliberately to fight it, he helped win the battle for biography, which is now, thanks to the books of a number of talented biographers, perfectly respectable once again.

This battle has been won to the extent that no one would argue today that you should not study both the artist and his work. Common sense calls for it; common decency is no longer able to prevent it. Ours is an age of exposure, in which it is difficult not to think with reference to biography, especially when so much contemporary literary art is itself heavily larded with autobiography. To resist exposure is one of the surest ways of having it thrust upon one. Among literary figures, both Auden and Orwell asked that no biographies be written of them; their wishes have been honored with at least four full biographies and more are in the offing. T. S. Eliot, who also wished no biography, will be the next to fall. Attempting to cut off the literary-biographical hyenas already snuffling around the corpse, his widow is now searching for a jackal of her own—that is, an official biographer.

I make myself sound as if I am four-square on the side of decency here. Yet I am not so sure. Return to T. S. Eliot for a moment. While no good unofficial biography has been written about him, a lot has been written about Eliot in the form of memoirs and other people's now published journals, diaries, and autobiographies. From this material it begins to seem as if the crucial event in T. S. Eliot's adult life was his marriage to his first wife, Vivien, who, not long after she and Eliot were married, went mad. The humiliation, the sadness, the tragedy of this marriage cannot but have had the most chivvying effects on Eliot's life as well as on his work. In point of fact he wrote "The Waste Land" at a particularly low period in this marriage. The reigning view of "The Waste Land" is that it is an elegant condemnation of industrial society. But can one discount the fact that its author was living day-to-day with a woman who was out of her mind? People talk chattily about the waste-land, about the abyss of modern life, but Eliot lived with the most terrifying waste, the darkest abyss; she sat across the breakfast table from him on God knows how many mornings. The longer one thinks about this horrendous biographical fact, the less certain one becomes that "The Waste Land" is an attack on industrial society. In his criticism Eliot insisted on the impersonality of poetry, but in his own most important poetry he might well have been locked into personality with a blue vengeance.

It is no longer possible, then, to ignore the importance of biography to literary study. While this is true, it is also true that biography has not yet moved into the university and hence has not been, in the full pejorative sense of the word, "academicized." Biography has not thus far been academicized, my guess is, because, even though it is central to literary study and unarguably an art in its own right, it is not very teachable. And in universities what is not very teachable—shocking to report—tends not to be taught. True, some biography makes its way into the current university curriculum: a bit of Izaak Walton, two or three of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets,* selections from Boswell's *Life of Johnson,* possibly one of the figures among Strachey's *Eminent Victorians.* But rarely are these studied as works of biographical art as such. More troublesome still, the contemporary works of biography that have been most praised—Leon Edel's five-volume *Henry James,* Richard Ellmann's nearly 900-page *James Joyce*—

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are too ample to render classroom service. Besides, even in that ideal university of the mind—where time expands endlessly, allowing a teacher to spend three hundred and eleven weeks on Proust—biography as a subject would present difficulties. Its history can be taught in a superficial way: selections again. But how study it for itself, as poetry and fiction are now studied?

Part of the difficulty is that there is nothing like a consensus about what makes for a good biography. Better than a consensus, though, is the actual appearance of good biographies. Since I intend to go on and say some fairly stringent things about what I take to be the larger trends in the writing of modern biography, allow me to mention here a number of what seem to be fine literary biographies of recent vintage: the John Wain and the W. Jackson Bate biographies of Samuel Johnson, the Frederick Brown biography of Jean Cocteau, the Henri Troyat biography of Tolstoy, the James Mellow biography of Gertrude Stein and her circle, and the first volumes of John Clive's biography of Macaulay and of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoyevsky.

It will be seen from this rather odd lot, written as they were under quite different methodological assumptions, that, aside from the idea that the facts need to be got straight, there is very little agreement, even among the better biographers, on how biography ought to be written. Nor is there agreement on which are the canonical works of modern biography and what critical tools ought to be brought to bear in the judgment of biographical works. Take Edel's *Henry James* and Ellmann's *James Joyce*. They have been highly praised, but each has also been savagely condemned: the Edel for what some critics feel is its excessive psychologizing, the Ellmann for what its critics feel is its pedantic detail. Nor should anyone be shocked that there is vast, even passionate, disagreement on the subject of biography. In biography, after all, the very largest issues are at stake, some of which can be formulated thus: How is human nature formed? What are the main springs of men's and women's lives? What in life—especially in discrete lives—is most significant? On such questions agreement simply isn't available. Yet each of these is a question that no biographer can hope to avoid.

If the university has not been able to appropriate biography into its curriculum, to absorb it, as the radicals used to say, nonetheless a number of literary academics have become biographers, and these have included the more cultivated literary academics. I have already mentioned Leon Edel and Richard Ellmann. But there are also Walter Jackson Bate, Aileen Ward, and Ernest Samuels. From outside the university scholarly biographies in recent years have been written by Justin Kaplan, Jean Strouse, and James Mellow. I mention here writers whom I think of as professional biographers, men and women who upon completing one biography set to work on another. How did they happen to become biographers? Through a love of the study of character, through a penchant for psychologizing, through want of any better arena in which to work their literary talent? One would perhaps have to have a biography of each of them to know with certainty.

One factor that has undoubtedly aided the rise of biography, at least in recent years, has been the decline of criticism. I had better qualify that to read the decline in the quality of criticism, for in its quantity, its sheer tonnage and bulk, I am not certain that criticism has declined. But for quite a while criticism—the literary act of judgment, interpretation, and valuation—has been nowhere near so central to our cultural life as it once was. In part, this is so because it appears as if all the major interpretations and valuations have been done by now. Is there really anything fresh left to be said, for example, about Kafka, about whom thousands of articles and books have been written and from whose work everything possible has been made except chopped liver? The great cannon of criticism, though still smoking, has been firing blanks for years. Proof of this point can be found in the fact

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that the hot names in academic literary departments at present are those names associated with the subject of literary theory. Literary theory, though, provides marshy lands and not every literary-minded person can—or would wish to—build upon them.

If literary theory seems too drearily obscurantist, literary criticism too tautological, that leaves, for people of literary sensibility who are not themselves imaginative literary artists, literary biography. I do not have statistics to back this up, but my sense is that a great number of literary biographies are now being written, especially by academics. A gold rush—or perhaps more accurately a zinc rush—is on, sufficiently so to make pointed a bit of dialogue in Barbara Pym's novel, *No Fond Return of Love,* in which a character informs another that she is lucky to have found an obscure eighteenth-century poet to do research upon. "'You were lucky to find one so obscure that not even the Americans had "done" him . . . . It's quite serious, this shortage of obscure poets.'" And there is a whiff of prophecy, too, in Max Beerbohm's send-up of the Garnetts' discovery of Dostoyevsky, which he entitled "Kolniyatsch": "Their promised biography of the murdered grandmother is awaited eagerly by all who take—and which of us does not take?—a breathless interest in Kolniyatschiana."

While we have not yet had the promised biography of Kolniyatsch's murdered grandmother, we may one day have a biography of our own unmurdered grandmother. In Portola Valley, California, there is an institution calling itself the American Lives Endowment, which helps ordinary people write biographies of their own family members, presumably for family as well as general historical purposes. In 1977, at the University of Hawaii, the Biographical Research Center was founded; its chief function has been the publication of a quarterly journal, *Biography,* and of monographs on biography. In Australia—at Griffith University in Brisbane—there is now something called the Institute for Modern Biography. For so long the homely sister of history and the dull cousin of criticism, biography is setting up shop for itself as a separate discipline. New approaches, new methods, new directions, such is the prevailing chatter among the biographia literati. Mr. George Simson, the editor of *Biography,* has been quoted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as saying that he believes the rise in interest in biography can be explained by Max Weber's notion that individuals gain in prominence at times when the prestige of institutions is low, as they certainly seem to be at present. Walter Jackson Bate, in the same article, is quoted as saying that what we are witnessing is a "natural flowering, the result of the decline of the old Victorian novel as a big, panoramic portrayal of a slice of life. In most novels since Thomas Mann, story and hero have been lost. The novel is no longer the prevailing form. Biography is stepping into the breach, portraying particular people and times the way the great novels of the past did. It's as simple as that."

In partial defense of Professor Bate, it must be said that few compliments please a biographer more than being told that his work reads like a novel—or, rather, like novels used to read. Honor, shame, loyalty to ideals, the hunger for achievement—such items, although rapidly disappearing from contemporary novels, remain at the center of biography, even if the biographer postulates a morally indifferent universe. Around such items character is formed, and the formation of character is what biography is about. Whether biography ought to be a separate discipline seems to me, in every sense of the word, an academic question. The chief thing is that biography, whatever its academic standing, has the great subject—human character. "There is properly no history," wrote Emerson, "only Biography." That is of course quite wrong, but in the middle of reading a powerful biography one is almost ready to believe it.

Biography has its own history, and no better opening to it is available than Arnaldo Momigliano's *The Development of Greek Biography* (1968). In this elegant, slim volume Professor Momigliano sketches the origins

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and ironies of biography's early history. Not least among the ironies is that in the ancient world autobiography was often bound to factuality and biography was expected to be encomiastic, while today things tend to be quite the reverse. Professor Momigliano surmises that the first man to give biography its new shape—outside and beyond the encomium—was one Aristoxenus of Tarentum (born c. 370 B.C.), a cosmopolite of Pythagorean training who also studied under Aristotle. Of Aristoxenus, Professor Momigliano writes:

> He must have picked up the loose threads of fifth-century biography, availed himself of the variety of biographical techniques displayed in the early fourth century, and appreciated the new trends of erudite research favoured by Aristotle. He was the man to produce a new blend: learned, yet worldly; attentive to ideas, yet gossipy. Perhaps he was also the first to make anecdotes an essential part of biography . . . . I suspect that we owe to Aristoxenus the notion that a good biography is full of good anecdotes.

One could, I suppose, draw a thread from Aristoxenus through Plutarch and Suetonius through the Church hagiographers through Vasari through Johnson and Boswell through Strachey through Freud—with many a side stitch along the way—and end up with an odd baggy garment that might be called the history of biography. But that history is perhaps better understood as being made up of the fortuitous, and sometimes ironic, couplings of hero and biographer. Every so often someone comes along to give the subject a sharp theoretical twist, as Samuel Johnson did by turning away from panegyric and toward serious literary criticism, or Lytton Strachey by turning prosecutor and putting many of his subjects on the stand as defendants, or Freud by turning the biographer's study into a psychoanalyst's office.

Yet, as inevitably with biography, rules refuse to remain intact. Thus Samuel Johnson, in his *Rambler* essay on biography, could lay it down that "if the biographer writes from personal knowledge, and makes haste to gratify the public curiosity, there is danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness, overpower his fidelity, and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent." Enter Boswell, filled with personal knowledge, anxious to gratify public curiosity, loaded with interest, gratitude, and tenderness, only to produce one of the landmark biographies. Then there is Lytton Strachey in 1918 announcing: "The art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England . . . . Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design?" That description, two volumes and all, fits nothing so well as Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey,* which appeared fifty years later.

When did modernity begin for literary biography? We know that Virginia Woolf set the date for the change in human nature —by which she meant a change in the nature of human relationships—at "about 1910." For Willa Cather the date life changed was 1922. But when was human nature, when were lives, portrayed differently in works of biography? Perhaps the watershed year is 1918, the year of the publication of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians.* The critical success of Strachey's book implied, at least for the time, that intelligent people were no longer quite able to believe in the standard panegyrical biography that had dominated the genre before the First World War. (For a fine example of the type see G. Otto Trevelyan's biography of his uncle, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay.*) With Strachey the biographer had ceased to be a man who performed an official function—that of placing a wreath of prose over the graves of great men and women—and had become an independent producer, an artist if he were good at his productions, and a writer with a point of view that did not always imply sympathy for his subject. And sometimes, as with

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Strachey, it implied quite the reverse, though here it must be recalled that Strachey, that menace of the Victorians, wrote a touching, really quite sentimental biography of Queen Victoria herself.

André Maurois, in *Aspects of Modern Biography* (1928), set forth three chief characteristics of modern biography. The first was the search for truth, by which Maurois meant exposing the whole story, letting the chips fall where they may. The second was the abandonment by the biographer of classical psychology, in which people were locked into strict psychological types, in favor of more fluid, diverse views that met the new insistence on "complexity of personality." The third was the element of doubt that had entered into the making and reading of biographies: "We ourselves live in an age of doubt and that is why we like to find in the lives of great men that they, too, have had their doubts and have nevertheless succeeded in achieving something." He had put it this way earlier in his book: "the greatness of a character comes home the more closely in proportion as we feel the character to be human and akin to our own." To put it less kindly, a taste had begun to develop to cut biographical subjects down to size, the size being about a 42-short, leaving plenty of room in the back for an unresolved Oedipal complex.

Increasingly, the tendency of modern biography has been to make its subjects a little smaller. I am hard pressed to think of many literary biographies—aside from the interesting case of Edel's *Henry James*—that leave their subject with much in the way of grandeur. Partly this is because when seen close up—which is the way modern biography likes to view its subjects—everyone seems a bit odd, a bit shrunken. Certainly James Joyce does not emerge larger than one had imagined him from Richard Ellmann's biography, and there can be no question of Ellmann's goodwill, not to say admiration, toward Joyce. Partly it is because the effect of elaborate literary psychologizing—in Frederic Karl's book on Joseph Conrad, for example, or Rudolpf Binion's book on Lou Andreas-Salomé—is to diminish its subjects, again quite apart from whatever admiration biographer may feel toward subject. And partly it is because modern biographers—like modern people generally—do not quite believe in grandeur, and feel duty bound to chip away at any pretense to it. "A man's biography," H. G. Wells observed, "should be written by a conscientious enemy." But in modern biography, serious enmity is not required; if a biographer is conscientious, he will soon be enemy enough.

There have been contemporary literary biographies motivated by admiration, even idolatry, and most have been written out of goodwill toward their subjects. But where they have been admiring—for example, Ian Hamilton's *Robert Lowell*—the admiration cannot cover over the squalor of the life. Where they have been idolatrous—for example, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography of Hannah Arendt—they have not been very persuasive. Goodwill usually does not prove strong enough to make up for ill-led lives. The fact must be faced: the subjects of most modern literary biographies have not exactly led lives that provide, in the idiom of the day, "fine role models." Consider the roll call: Theodore Dreiser, the Fitzgeralds, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Frost, and now, the most recent victim of the modern biographer's guillotine, Katherine Anne Porter. But no matter how an author has led his life, he will eventually feel the blade. Approaching the stairs now is Willa Cather, about whom a "revelatory" biography is to appear this fall. Still waiting in the tumbrel below are Edmund Wilson, Allen Tate, and Marianne Moore.

The only two writers I can think of who seem to have held up under the hot magnifying lens of modern biography have been Henry James and Samuel Johnson. No matter how much biographical work is done on these men, they somehow refuse to be diminished. What it turns out they have in common—neither was exemplary, each *sui generis*—is that both were very good men. And a good man, in literary life as in the old

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pop tune, is hard to find. But then there is no strong evidence that modern biographers are looking very scrupulously. The category of goodness, as it relates to literary work, does not seem to weigh heavily in modern literary biography.

The scenario for the typical modern literary biography is moral in a different way. It is morality weighted in favor of art, so that the creation of art justifies almost anything. In this kind of biography such disorder and continual sorrow as the artist suffers is gone into as fully as the material allows. An account might be offered of how our hero, a poet, trashed his first marriage, began drinking in earnest, and entered into a hopeless love affair with a student while writer in residence at, say, Wesleyan University. Bad reviews of his third book put him on pills and helped break up his second marriage, although the year of his divorce he published his famous essay on Whitman in the old *Kenyon Review*. His son from his first marriage tried to kill himself the following year, the year his sonnet sequence won the Sophie Pritzker Prize at *Poetry* magazine. Well, anyone who has read recent biographies of contemporary poets—Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, Robert Lowell—could finish the story himself. The poet dies at fifty-two, leaving general devastation behind, but there was that first wonderful book of poems, three or four essays as good as any that have appeared in our time, and the fragment from the only just begun critico-autobiographical book on Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost. Art wins again. Or does it?

Whenever there is a change in psychology, a change in morality follows; and whenever there is a change in morality, modes of judgment change. In the psychological revolution wrought by Freud, Jung, and the various Ottos, Annas, Brunos, and Wilhelms who make up the great Viennese chorus, biography, especially the biography of artists, has been shaken profoundly. It has been pushed in the direction of regarding men and women—to refer again to Malraux's phrase—as "a miserable little pile of secrets." It could scarcely have been otherwise. If you believe in the doctrines of Freud & Co. you are, whether you wish to think so or not, lashed to the belief that a man is likely to be hiding what is most important about himself. In psychoanalysis the patient is made aware of his painful secrets and taught how best to live with them. In biographical psychoanalysis, the reader is made aware of the biography's hero's secrets, but it is not clear that as a result anyone lives any better.

By no means do all modern biographers psychoanalyze, though they all, to a greater or lesser extent, psychologize. The temptation to do so upon writers and artists of any kind probably can no longer be foregone, so clearly is the making of art now felt to be a psychological transaction, chiefly handled by the firm of Sublimation, Inc. Because of the way in which modern psychology tends to regard the creation of art—as the work done by men and women who would really rather be doing something else: guess what?—the artist is viewed as a not quite healthy character and thus he is granted the moral equivalent of diplomatic immunity. In biography it is only the artist—and, at very high levels, the scientist and philosopher—who is permitted to be a person of deeply flawed or even bad character. An artist is to be judged, finally, on his art. From the standpoint of criticism, this makes good sense. From the standpoint of biography, however, it is often a disaster. It leaves the biographer without the means of judging character and it largely narrows his task down to the search for those miserable little secrets.

This search has more than a little to do with the lengthening of modern literary biographies. The one indisputable point about modern literary biographies is their propensity to grow longer and longer. Henry James's fine story about the problem of finding the key to an author's work is entitled "The Figure in the Carpet." Modern biographers continue to look for that key, only now they lay the carpet of their subjects' lives wall to wall. Biographical studies of modest length—such as John Morley's *Edmund Burke,* in The English Men of Letters series, or F.W. Dupee's *Henry James,* in

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The American Men of Letters series—have departed the scene. No publisher is asking for them, no writers are writing them. The trend toward biographical elephantiasis seems to have begun with Mark Shorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (1961), a book of eight hundred and sixty-seven pages in which Shorer seemed to demonstrate less and less regard for his author as his biography sloughed its wooden way to its close. Today most literary biographies weigh in at more than five hundred pages, quite apart from their subjects' intrinsic importance, or so at any rate do Paul Mariani's *William Carlos Williams,* Joan Givner's *Katherine Anne Porter,* Ian Hamilton's *Robert Lowell,* and Martin Seymour-Smith's *Robert Graves.* Hilary Mills's *Mailer: A Biography,* true enough, is a slender four hundred and seventy-seven pages, but then her subject has miles to go before he sleeps. The heart sinks a little, at least mine does, at the sight of such bricklike tomes, tomes weighty, one feels, only in the literal sense.

Length, *per se,* is not the problem. George D. Painter's two-volume *Marcel Proust* does not seem to me in the least excessive. I know it has been said that, for all its power, no one ever wished *Paradise Lost* to be longer, but Leon Edel's *Henry James,* though it runs to five volumes, seemed to me over too soon. Both Painter and Edel are men of considerable literary culture and both write extremely well. (A biographer, it occurs to me, cannot always hope to be as intelligent as his subject, but it is best if he is not too much dumber.) Yet more than cultural endowment and excellent prose is behind the high quality of their biographies.

What makes these two works so good is that in each one finds a sense of proportion and a sense of purpose. Painter's *Marcel Proust,* although it does a number of things besides, is dominated, and rightly so in my view, by a single fact: Painter's subject wrote the greatest novel of the twentieth century. Painter saw his task, then, as explaining how this came about; and in the course of doing so he finds himself explaining the novel as well; and because of the complex connections between Proust's novel and the events and relationships in Proust's life, explaining into the bargain how Proust used real people and actual events in his novel and how he transformed them into fodder for his imagination. Painter's biography is one long work of explanation, and since the interest in *Remembrance of Things Past* is inexhaustible—it is, at least, to me—so is the interest in George D. Painter's *Marcel Proust.*

Leon Edel's *Henry James* is a very different kettle of caviar. I have more than once attempted to account for what it is I so much admire about this long, persistently psychologizing work, when neither great length nor literary *shrinkierie* is my notion of a holiday at the sea. Nor is the criticism in Edel's work all that striking; it is always interesting, always intelligent, but more penetrating criticisms of James's books have been written than those that appear in Edel's biography. On the other side of the ledger, there is of course Henry James, about whom I love to read. Edel's book is as good as any book I have ever read about the organization of a writer's life, and no being was ever better organized for writing than Henry James. But more is involved.

Although artful biographies have been written of literary figures, books beautifully composed and shining with intelligence, there is no biography of our age that comes close to Leon Edel's *Henry James* as a work of art. Unlike any other modern biography I know, *Henry James* is a shaped work. Edel does wondrous things with time in his book, shifting back and forth with it, playing incidents and anecdotes for dramatic effect. Quotation is used with tact and always to a point, and never cited more lengthily than an incident being dealt with requires. Criticism is worked in quietly, supplementing but not interrupting the narrative. Edel demonstrates that the only entrée to a mind as fine as James's is through an understanding of its subtle psychological shadings. Even though one might disagree with discrete points or interpretations—was William James really as rivalrous in his feeling toward his younger brother as Edel makes

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him out to be?—the book is no more spoiled for its reader by this than a long novel is spoiled if one finds a character less than well drawn or a scene or two not altogether convincing. There is sweep to this biography, a sense of a life understood in its unity—unity of a kind that Henry James and the great nineteenth-century novelists assumed life to have. When James dies at the end of Leon Edel's fifth volume, one feels as if one has come to the close of a superior novel.

Lengthy though the Painter and Edel biographies are, authoritative though each seeks to be, neither, it strikes me, is definitive—and I intend that as a compliment. The urge to be definitive is the great hubris of the biographical craft. To want to write a life definitively, to have the very last word on it, to nail it down, to attempt to establish one's own literary immortality over someone else's dead body, this is a grievously mistaken impulse. It is this impulse that gives so many biographies their feeling of literary sprawl. Apart from wishing to be definitive, what can be the possible justification for writing books of more than five hundred pages on such figures as Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Graves, and Hannah Arendt? Yet definitive is the ultimate garland reviewers toss over the necks of biographers. This, even though almost every biography that has sought to be definitive in recent years has turned out to be, in some truly definitive way, a botch: Mark Shorer's *Sinclair Lewis,* Carlos Baker's *Ernest Hemingway,* John Unterecker's *Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane,* Joseph Blotner's *William Faulkner.*

Hugh Kenner put the point interestingly when, in a recent review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of Richard Ellmann's revised edition of *James Joyce,* he wrote: "But there can be no 'definitive' biography. Biography is a narrative form: that means, a mode of fiction. Many narratives can be woven from the same threads." I think that very intelligent yet also very dangerous. It strikes me as all too close to the thinking of Roland Barthes, who finds biography offensive because it involves "a counterfeit integration of the subject." There is a nihilism inherent in that notion, at least until one is able to supply an authentic integration of human character. One can say—as I more than once have—that autobiographers usually lie and biographers generally get it wrong, but one must insist on those qualifiers "usually" and "generally."

What remains at issue today is how a biographical portrait ought to be put together. Ought it to be composed, Seurat-like, with pinpoints of fact that taken together will add up to a large picture, or Van Goghishly, with large brushstrokes of interpretation? Harold Nicolson, in his book *The Development of English Biography,* felt that the hunger for facts, which he termed the scientific interest in biography, would win out. And it seems to have. Think only for a moment on the disparity, the madness really, of Lytton Strachey's writing a biography of Queen Victoria, who lived eighty-one years and gave her name to one of the great ages of man, that is briefer than Hilary Mills's biography of Norman Mailer. But to return to Harold Nicolson, who wrote:

> . . . the scientific interest in biography is hostile to, and will in the end prove destructive of, the literary interest. The former will insist not only on the facts, but on all the facts; the latter demands a partial or artificial representation of facts. The scientific interest, as it develops, will become insatiable; no synthetic power, no genius for representation, will be able to keep the pace.

It must be added that scientific biography, based as it is on a foundation and continual piling up of fact, tends to bring an air of dubiety to the biographical enterprise. Carlos Baker's *Ernest Hemingway* is as fact-ridden a modern literary biography as I have read—and inert. Biography, like fiction, is the art of selection. Even though biography is bound by fact, its truth is finally literature's kind of truth—truth completely comprehended not by the categories of right and wrong but by the categories of more and less persuasive.

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If biography is bound by fact, it is also bound by time. Nicolson says that "no branch of literature has been more sensitive than biography to 'the spirit of the age,'" and that "the development of biography is primarily the development of the taste for biography." This is why every age rewrites the biographies of important figures, and why in literary biography there are nearly countless biographies of Stendhal, Samuel Johnson, Lord Byron. As it happens, the spirit of our age seems to call for building up factual material and the taste of the time for stripping down the pretensions of the mighty—including, sometimes, pretensions to dignity. Given this spirit and that taste, I can think of a number of biographies I would be willing to pay anywhere between $19.95 and $29.95 *not* to read: among them, biographies of Willa Cather (a lesbian?), Wallace Stevens (a nightmare marriage?), George Santayana (don't ask).

"Little demons of subtlety" Henry James called those critics—and, by extension, critical literary biographers—who seek to discover an author's hidden meaning. But the question arises, is meaning always hidden? Leon Edel has written that though the biographer must learn "to understand man's ways of dreaming, thinking and using his fancy," this "does not mean that a biographical subject can be psychoanalyzed; a biographical subject is not a patient and not in need of therapy." But I would go one step further to argue that many lives—let us call them "sanforized"—are quite impervious to the notions of the shrink, and that these notions have little or no place in their biographies. Certainly it is the better part of biographical wisdom to know when they do and when they don't.

Where once literary biography was chiefly commemorative, today it is largely explanatory. Today most people write literary biographies less to honor than to explain their subjects, although, to put the best face on it, honor is implied in the effort at explanation. To put the worst possible face on it, biographers are, in Elizabeth Hardwick's sharp phrase, "the quick in pursuit of the dead."

Although not a writer, Albert Einstein, who was nonetheless an artist in his own fashion, once noted: "The essential in the being of a man of my type lies in *what* and *how* he thinks, not in what he does or suffers." That is undeniably so, but who can honestly deny that he isn't also interested in what important men and women do and suffer? Whether or not we are entitled to know is quite another question, however, and the answer is not all that complicated. We are entitled to know all a dead writer's miserable little pile of secrets only insofar as knowledge of these secrets seriously alters or substantially enhances the reading of his work. If the revelation of such secrets in a literary biography doesn't work toward these ends, then, however great our pleasure, we are finally reading through a keyhole.

Literary biography presents a serious epistemological problem, which may be formulated thus: How much truth can we know about another person's life? When literary biography was less ambitious, when it was content to limn the shape of a writer's career, to account for his accomplishments, it could sail along blithely enough on its way, producing interesting and useful if somewhat limited material. But once literary biography began to play in deeper, choppier waters, diving beneath the surface to discover hidden motives, dark secrets, terrors, and traumas, it became at once more interesting and more dubious. The challenge for the biographer is greater because the risks of failure are greater. One has only to think about one's own hidden motives, dark secrets, terrors, and traumas, and about how unavailable they often are to oneself, to know how unlikely it is that a stranger calling himself biographer should come into knowledge of them. Still, it sometimes happens. Yet now, as always, successful biography is what it was for Edmund Gosse, writing in the eleventh edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life." When that portrait is indeed faithful and the soul great, biography is as splendid a literary form as any yet invented.

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Lewis Mumford: on the way to the New Jerusalem

by Edward Shils

In a time when scientific and scholarly intellectual activity has come more and more to be conducted by persons holding appointments in universities, or, if not in universities, then in research institutions, Lewis Mumford has a special claim upon our respectful attention. He inherited no significant sum of money from his relations and only infrequently has he been a beneficiary of the patronage of private foundations. His autobiography, *Sketches from Life,*[1] says nothing about his having been sent abroad, even once, under the auspices of the United States Information Agency or any governmental cultural propaganda organization. His major works were written before the National Endowment for the Humanities came into existence. He has never been an editor responsible for publishing a magazine with the burdens and income such a post provides. Lewis Mumford might be our only surviving *Privatgelehrter*—the only author of scholarly works who has gained his livelihood as a free-lance writer. Authors of biographies and of popular historical works sometimes do very well and of course some novelists of merit, after many years of penury and eking out a meager livelihood, earn large sums from their writings, and some novelists of little merit receive very large sums indeed. Lewis Mumford has written twenty-eight books and a very great number of articles. Several of these books have been based on an amount of research that would do credit to a diligent university teacher who is able to concentrate mainly on research while doing only six to eight hours of teaching weekly, often on topics closely connected with the problem of his research.

A free-lance scholar has become a rare creature; Lewis Mumford is such a creature. To be such a creature against the trend in the organization of learning requires special qualities. It requires an obstinate devotion to a truth and a calling, a willingness to live on a modest scale, and a capacity to resist temptations which hold out the prospect of a larger income. Lewis Mumford possesses these qualities in good measure. They are not accidents; they require moral self-discipline. On these grounds alone, Lewis Mumford is worthy of our deference.

Strangely, Mumford puts one in mind of Lou Gehrig, the great Yankee first baseman who established a record for the number of consecutive games in which he played. A cynical observer once said Gehrig's fame showed how far one could get by standing in the same place all the time. This was unjust because Gehrig was also a batter and fielder of outstanding achievements. Similarly, an assessment of Lewis Mumford's claim to our deference must take into account more than his estimable accomplishment in having gone his own way intellectually for about three-fifths of a century

1 *Sketches from Life: The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford: The Early Years* by Lewis Mumford; Dial, 512 pages, $19.95

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and for having stuck unyieldingly to his very broad last for all this time. There has been a constancy of theme and outlook; the theme has broadened, the outlook has become more differentiated as Mumford's learning has become fuller and richer. Mumford has never abandoned his starting point.

Mumford's starting point was common to many serious American intellectuals of the early decades of this century. There was much distress about the condition of American society and American culture. The society was thought to be brutal and unjust, the culture both genteel and vulgar; materialism, the desire for wealth and power, was thought to be universally and unqualifiedly dominant. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean stood old Europe, with its rich cultural traditions, its respect for the works of the mind and their producers. Europe was the standard by which these intellectuals measured their own country. Europe was thought to be superior; its superiority was as distressing as America's inferiority. It was not just the shortcomings of American society and culture according to a higher standard of universal validity; it was its inferiority to Europe which caused pain. The problem for this generation, in which Van Wyck Brooks stands out as the leader, was to rescue the culture of the United States from the ignominy of its present state, to find a "usable" past that would give American intellectuals self-esteem and self-confidence and enable them to stand up to Europe. There was a conviction that there was such a "usable" tradition but that it had been forgotten after the Civil War. If it could be recovered, reinstated, and reanimated, American culture could come of age. America would no longer be inferior to Europe. Reproving though these Americans were toward the crude nationalism that had so startled Alexis de Tocqueville and Charles Dickens and that had been exacerbated in their own time, the seekers for a "usable" past were nationalists too. They could not easily escape from the attachment to their country, however much they disliked its visible and tangible manifestations.

This resentment of intellectuals of peripheral countries against the international center and the center of their own society has a long history. Russian populism and Slavophilism were similar efforts to enhance the standing of the Russian periphery by denying the virtues of the international center and the domestic center which they believed lay under its dominion. The populists found the true and saving center in the peasantry, the Slavophiles found it in the traditions of Orthodox Russia. Far profounder and far more fruitful intellectually was the German criticism of the Enlightenment. Admiration of the creative power of the ordinary villager and countryman, unspoiled by education or by French literature or by the teachings of the *philosophes,* was coupled with the appreciation of the cultural creativity of the common people in language, fairy tales, and folklore. The American seekers for a usable past did not think that it could be found in the common people. Only H. L. Mencken, who in an unsteady and cheerful way shared their view of the American present, saw creative powers in the ordinary man; his *The American Language* stood squarely in this tradition.

Lewis Mumford was also a seeker after a usable past. He too found it, but it was an indeterminately located past. Sometimes this center of truth, wisdom, and decency was located in the past of his boyhood, sometimes in the past of his young manhood, sometimes in the past of the nineteenth century, sometimes in the past of the medieval town, sometimes even in the Neolithic age.[2] Regardless of the variability of the locus of

2 The virtues of the medieval town were discovered by Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* (1938) and reaffirmed in *The City in History* (1961). The wisdom of the Neolithic age is also one of Mumford's recurrent themes. It becomes particularly prominent in his increasingly passionate arguments against the technological developments of the period since the Second World War. See especially *The Myth of the Machine* (1967) and *The Pentagon of Power* (1970).

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the past in which the center of moral and cultural existence was situated, it was never in the present; it was certainly never in his own present or in his own country. From time to time and momentarily, Mumford seems to have believed that there had been progress in one category of activity or another, but it had come to a dead halt by the time in which he wrote. The present of the years just after the First World War seemed, when he was living in them, to be the worst of times; it was a time without hope but it was soon displaced at the bottom of the scale of human existence by the 1930s. The decades after the Second World War—especially as recounted in *My Works and Days* (1979)—then appeared to be the reign of the Antichrist.

The abominable essence of the present is the unchanging anticenter of Lewis Mumford's cosmos. There has, however, been perhaps one significant change in Mumford's attachments. At the end of his twenties, when he wrote *The Golden Day*—an original reassessment and vindication of the hitherto unappreciated great age of American literature in the middle decades of the nineteenth century—he was still a nationalist, although he would have probably been horrified to hear himself so described. In later years he transcended this narrowing attachment; he took all mankind as his province and made it into the object of his solicitude.

Lewis Mumford is a severe critic of the Enlightenment, but his heterogeneous thought bears its marks. This stern critic of the rationalistic, scientific attitude toward life believes in planning. He believes in the possibility and even more in the desirability of planned communities; one of the achievements of which he is most proud is his role in the formation and activities of the Regional Planning Association of America. It is hard to imagine Herder or Hamann, those Romantic forerunners of Mumford, belonging to a planning association! I mention these two writers because it is within the tradition which they helped to precipitate that Mumford's outlook has moved.

Mumford is a person of genuine intellectual character. There is an entelechy in him which has impelled him steadily through the persistent development of a certain line of thought. This entelechy might have compelled him to develop that line by himself, unaided, just as he has made his career as a writer practically unaided by universities, research institutes, fellowships, and other kinds of institutional patronage. That is quite possible, but he has in fact had the way for his intellectual course fairly well laid out for him. He himself acknowledges with defensive gratitude how much he owed to the distinguished Scottish crank, Patrick Geddes, who combined organicism with planning. He owes just as much to the Romantic *Gemeinschaftsschwärmerei* that was intensified by Ferdinand Tönnies's book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft,* Simmel's essay on *Die Grossstadt und das Geistesleben,* Werner Sombart's *Der Bourgeois* (translated in 1915 as *The Quintessence of Capitalism*), and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic.*

Unlike his contemporaries, who, even in their own Romantic search for a "usable past," also remained within the tradition of the Enlightenment—which is why so many of them became fellow-travelers of scientistic Marxism as embodied in the Communist Party in the 1930s—Mumford belongs to the organicistic strand of Romanticism. He believes in organic communities, he is the spokesman of the "whole organism," he is all for "organic wholes." His writings abound in praise of and in lessons drawn from the "wisdom of the organism." In *The Myth of the Machine,* for example, he wrote: "Purely organic functions . . . produce their own kind of order and internal balance: the animal instincts are inherently functional and purposeful, and so, within their own context, rational: that is, appropriate to the situation and intending to promote survival, organic fulfillment, and reproduction of the species."

What Mumford has against modern Western and perhaps primarily American society and the powerful strata of American society is that they believe exclusively in science and

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ratiocination and that they propose to use scientific knowledge in the pursuit of profit and the exercise of power. Mumford is against "bigness" and he is in favor of small towns and small cities, although, true to his generation of intellectuals, he has little sympathy for the Spoon Rivers and Winesburgs of his own time. He is all against centers and centralization, all for the independent peripheries so near to self-containedness that the large powerful national state would lose its "megamechanical" ascendancy. He became a citizen of the world while deeply attached to his own Amenia, the merit of which is old buildings, an enticing landscape, gardens producing flowers and vegetables, and . . . the proximity of other intellectuals! Lewis Mumford loves the small community and thinks that it is only in the small community, in the small city, and in its surrounding region that man can realize his humanity. But Voltaire's advice that we should cultivate our gardens is not good enough for Lewis Mumford, who as a citizen of the world would legislate for all mankind. He gave his approval to Robert Hutchins, G. A. Borgese, and Elizabeth Mann Borgese's scheme to promulgate a "world constitution." What a Benthamite project for one who for much of his life had been pained by the curse of bigness! Except for such insistent deviations, his devotions are addressed to smallness, regionalism, organic growth, an organic pattern of individual existence, and an organic social order; he loves natural landscapes and flowers, neighborhoods, and spontaneous emotional expression. He hates rationally calculated capitalism and the bourgeois order of life, with its mechanical reckoning of time, its disjunction from the rhythms of nature, and its puritanical attitude toward sensual pleasure. He dislikes rapid change; although he is fascinated by machinery, he abhors it. He is a thoroughgoing Romantic.

Mumford's revulsion against present-day Western societies, which he thinks are dominated by the exclusive search for profit and power, is the reverse side of the Romantic coin so elaborately engraved in his learned investigations. Yet although he has hated capitalism as the epitome of evil, Mumford has never been tempted by Marxian socialism. He has been too much of a liberal ever to be at all attracted by the ideology of fascism and National Socialism, although both of these alleged to espouse an organic social order. Throughout the 1930s and during the Second World War, Mumford was a resolute opponent of totalitarianism and from the time the issue arose in the United States he was an interventionist, parting company from his old friend Van Wyck Brooks in his opposition to American isolationism and in his refusal to countenance a trivial honor for Charles Beard for that reason. As an American liberal, despite his aversion from bigness, he has however also favored governmental regulation of industry and the welfare policies of modern governments. Although critical of the NRA, he was a great admirer of Franklin Roosevelt and approved of many of his domestic policies, although they were the prelude to the weakening of local and state governments and the great growth of centralized power in the United States that he so much deplores. Despite his disapproval of the United States, especially the United States of the present day, Mumford has imbibed too much of the collectivistic liberalism of his own generation to be as consistent in his "organicism" as he sometimes appears to be.

Each age, as Mumford considers it, is a retrogression from the preceding age. However much the nineteenth century might be denounced when compared with Europe before the growth of industrial capitalism and of huge cities, it was a better century than the twentieth. However bad America was before the First World War—with its urban slums, its allegedly ruthless and unbounded materialism, its disrespect for the life of the spirit—it was better than the America of the 1920s, which offered no hope for the younger generation and which was corrupt and naïvely optimistic about solving all human problems by the application of science through scientific technol-

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ogy. However repugnant the 1920s were, alongside the 1930s they made for a good decade, when publishers still dealt personally and discriminatingly with authors. The Thirties was a terrible decade, with fascism, National Socialism, and Communism triumphant in Europe and fascism threatening to gain power in the United States. The period after the Second World War, being the most recent, is the worst of all. In *My Works and Days* he wrote: "My problem is to explain how the world of 1914 became the world of today, whose leaders have proved by their plans and actions that they have seen nothing, understood nothing, learned nothing and repented nothing; and who now interpret 'progress' as a license to commit on a planetary scale all the collective errors and sins and crimes of their historical predecessors." Technology has got entirely out of control, frivolous scientists think that computers will solve all the problems of human life at the very time when mankind is threatened with annihilation by atomic weapons and suffocation by pollution of the physical environment. When he considers the United States of recent decades, his revulsion is boundless. In *My Works and Days,* for example, he equates "Nixonism" with Stalinism and Hitlerism. As the Duke of Wellington is reported to have said at the height of his fame to a man who had greeted him as "Mr. Smith": "If you will believe that, Sir, you will believe anything."

Lewis Mumford is in such a desperate and embittered state of mind against the age in which he lives that he too is ready to believe anything as long as it is sufficiently disparaging. The world in which he lives appears to him to be unrelievedly mechanized and dehumanized; it is a scene of unmitigated monstrosity. And yet Mumford speculates—against the evidence that he has so studiously assembled and arranged—that there will be a new golden day in which man will be transformed. Wholeness will be restored, the mind will find its balance, and man will come into an organic relationship with nature.

Mumford, who is of half-Christian, half-Jewish extraction, has no religious affiliation or any sympathy for Jewish and Christian traditions. But he has faith in redemption—in this world, not the next one. Although he has an apocalyptic vision of the world as it exists, he has faith that Armageddon will be followed by redemption. He himself is proof that the past is never lost. Although he writes about the world of the last third of a century as if the past had been utterly extirpated, the peculiar apocalyptic optimism of the Judeo-Christian tradition still lives on in him.

This same combination of apocalyptic anticipation and utopian aspiration provides the framework for what is undoubtedly Lewis Mumford's most solid assessment of contemporary American culture—namely, his writings on modern architecture. These are by no means devoid of his customary faults, to be sure. In these writings, too, he has been unsparing in lamentations about the decline of civilization. He has also been more than a little nostalgic for what he deems to be better and more innocent times than our own—especially the time, as he sees it, when the machine could be worshipped for its beauty and before it began to be worshipped for its profitability and murderousness. Yet when confronted with the concrete objects of architectural criticism, Mumford has often shown himself to be a keen observer and far more convincing when he is analyzing a specific building than when hectoring us about the collapse of the world. He has "a very good eye." Especially in "The Skyline," a column that he wrote for many years in *The New Yorker,* he provided some of the most penetrating accounts of new architecture that have been produced in the period since the Second World War. It might be thought to be a misfortune to have always to write about what one hates. But this is one of the vital sources of Lewis Mumford's industriousness and eloquence. His hatred of the modern industrial city has sustained him. It has obscured and distorted his perception of many things, but it has also sharpened his eye.

Lewis Mumford is a man of strong intel-

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ligence and a certain amount of fellow-feeling. He has shown remarkable courage and a steadfast devotion to an ideal of the pursuit of truth. Yet with all his strength of mind and character, he has not been strong enough to withstand the force of the misleading traditions in the midst of which he grew up intellectually and that he thinks he has outgrown. The dislike of the contemporary world and especially the dislike of contemporary American society and culture has been a postulate of many American intellectuals for the past century and a half. They acquired the attitude from a Europe that they admired and resented and they sharpened it by their own nationalistic sense of inferiority to Europe and their desire to escape from it. Lewis Mumford, who has given his whole life to the free play of his intelligence and to the application of his exceptional intellectual energy, has not been successful in freeing himself from the fundamental antinomian prejudices that this tradition has infused into him.

Now, nearing the end of the ninth decade of his life, Mumford has published an autobiography that covers more or less the first half of his life. *Sketches from Life* is both extremely interesting and somewhat embarrassing. Its best chapters are the early ones in which, with warmth of heart, he describes his mother, his stepgrandfather, and his uncles in New York and Philadelphia. His accounts of the New York through which he first walked with his stepgrandfather, of his schools and teachers, show a gift of clear personal delineation, which falters when he writes about the friends of his adult years, friends for whom he obviously had profound affection, such as Van Wyck Brooks and Joel E. Spingarn. He is opposed to the kind of mind that proceeds through abstraction and is filled with praise for the whole person and relationships that embrace the whole person, but he does not succeed in the concrete portrayal of the individuals with whom he was so long in close and affectionate association. Perhaps his complicated and strenuous relationship with Patrick Geddes, of whom he does present a vivid portrait, exhausted his capacities for such personal perception.

It is conceivable that as Mumford advanced in years his convictions became obdurate and the grooves of his new idiom of expression deepened into the very mode of abstraction that is repugnant to him. As his belief in the value of the engagement of the whole person in his relationships with other human beings expanded, his capacity to recall and evoke other individuals diminished. It seems that a change took place in Mumford. Like everything else about him, it was not random or accidental. He would not have been so single-minded in his desire to protect his own independence had he not had a conviction of being called to some high mission, to which practically everything else had to be subordinated. From at least the second half of his thirties he passed from the instruction of his fellow countrymen about their past and present to warning humanity against the fate which awaited it if it did not turn against its inherited beliefs and follow the path of life which he was laying out before them. He has gradually become a prophet.

Lewis Mumford takes pride in the fact that he has never knowingly allowed himself to be placed in bondage to any institution or individual. He is very proud that he has made an intellectual career without having been ground under the wheels of the PhD juggernaut—although it is a little saddening to observe his pride in being a member of various inconsequential honorific societies or in having been invited to be a visiting professor in the universities that he otherwise regards as temples worshipping false idols. (The long "reading lists" of which he is proud and which are placed at the end of his main works also exhibit a deplorable desire to outdo professors at their own game; they are very schoolmasterly indeed, as are the often condescending approbations of particular works. Sad, too, is the fatuity of some of the annotations.) But whatever the shadows of uncertainty intermittently attending that pride, he has little uncertainty about the mission to which he has been

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called. Mumford has an image of himself, not just as an incorruptible and scholarly seeker after truth, but as a man who has been called to bring a message to mankind. The message is that mankind can save itself only by purging itself of its passion for power and profit, by renouncing its desire for material comfort and the pleasures of consumption, by denouncing its belief in the salvationary capacity of scientific knowledge and the technology that knowledge spawns. Despite his indifference to or even contempt for traditional religious beliefs, Lewis Mumford is the prophet of earthly redemption. Auguste Comte attempted to replace Christianity by "positive philosophy," that is, by science, on which the religion of humanity would be built. Mumford offers to a humanity deprived of the solace of religious belief and threatened with extermination by scientific technology the promise of a blissful existence without conflict and without danger, without cruelty and without selfishness. Sixty years ago, Mumford wrote a book on utopias; it was his first book of nearly thirty. Critical though he was of the boring unimaginativeness of the accounts of utopian life, he has ended where he began. He has indeed never strayed from the path which he set for himself at the beginning of his career as a sage and a prophet of a New Jerusalem.

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Art

The González exhibition

by William Tucker

Early in 1970 I was asked by the Tate Gallery to write the catalogue introduction for a projected González exhibition. I accepted, wrote the piece, and my essay was sent in manuscript as a matter of courtesy to the artist's representative in Paris, the Galerie de France. The reaction was angry and immediate: my text could not be altered or modified—it must be deleted from the catalogue or the sculpture would not be released for the London exhibition. I had no choice but to withdraw; it was important that a good selection of González's work be seen for the first time in England, if belatedly to say the least, after his influence had been substantial on two successive generations, the so-called "geometry of fear" sculptors of the Fifties, and my own generation of abstract sculptors in the Sixties.

Rereading that essay today (it was printed unchanged in my *Early Modern Sculpture*), and reconsidering González's oeuvre as seen in the present show at the Guggenheim,[1] I feel the protective response of his agents in 1970 was possibly justified. They were, after all, trying to secure for González the standing of a major modern master, if not the equal of Picasso, then certainly not far behind, at least the equal of Brancusi and David Smith. González's doubt, modesty, and caution were not qualities to be proclaimed at that moment, in those circumstances.

Today, in this country, especially in the light of David Smith's achievement and his continuous and generous acknowledgment of his debt to González, there can be little doubt about González's historic contribution to the vocabulary of modern sculpture. But who González was as an individual, what he and only he had to say as an artist, and whether his work is really worthy of such attention, considered apart from his role as "the father of all iron sculpture of this century" (Smith)—these are questions that only so comprehensive a survey as the current show can answer, and even then much remains obscure. In a way, the more fully the evidence is presented, the more difficult the problem of identifying González's "voice" becomes. The show includes a surprisingly large number of mask images, in proportion to other images in his work: one can argue that his training and the character of the material make the mask an obvious motif, but I feel something more is being said by this preference. Photographs of the artist published in the catalogue[2] show him

1 "Julio González: A Retrospective," The Guggenheim Museum, March 11 through May 8. The exhibition was organized by Margit Rowell. It will travel to the Museo Español de Arte Contemporaneo in Madrid (June 15–August 13) and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin (September 11–October 30).

2 Margit Rowell's catalogue, *Julio González: A Retrospective*, is published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (paperback, $18.50).

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as an insubstantial, shadowy figure, almost ghostlike. The three self-portraits are no more revealing, having in common only an expression of slight bewilderment. The last self-portrait, in oil (ca. 1942), is especially curious. Only the right side of the head, with the ground behind, is depicted; but it is evidently finished: the remainder of the sheet is empty, except for a pencil study of the right eye, and two random ink marks. One is uncertain whether these precede or follow the painting; and whether the painting itself was abandoned, left deliberately incomplete, or interrupted by the artist's death. The image is symbolic of the ambiguity that surrounds both the artist and the making and subsequent interpretation of his work.

González is the antithesis of the assertive male artists who dominated modern art, employing radical styles to conquer and reconquer the high ground of history. With his extreme self-questioning and sensitivity, González seems quite out of place in such company. He works from within a given style, or styles, rather than identifying himself with a new one. (In passing, if one were to characterize Giacometti as equally retiring and unassertive, consider how pervasive and identifiable is the image of his postwar work.) González's apologists are put in the dilemma of having on the one hand to acknowledge the encouragement and influence of Picasso on González, and of González's role as a link between Picasso and Smith, and on the other hand being obliged to define González's sculpture of the Thirties as being *unlike* the work that stimulated it and the work it stimulated.

González was fifty-two in 1930, when he made the *Harlequin Pierrot,* his first truly substantial and independent sculpture. He died in 1942, but had been unable to get gas for welding after the outbreak of the war. His craft work clearly occupied most of his time up to 1930. His "fine art" up to that point, though sure and sensitive, gives no indication of a desire to overturn the order of things. (In this he is clearly different from more recent "late developers" among the American Abstract Expressionists, who showed the ambition and the desire to revolt long before discovering the weapons.) Even within the ten years that were left to him for the development of a distinct and personal style in the new medium, there are a remarkable number of inconsistencies, not least of course being the return to a conventional if highly competent naturalism in hammered steel sheet of the *Montserrat.* In fact the Guggenheim exhibition shows this kind of treatment of a peasant-figure motif to have run through the Thirties. Another directly recognizable treatment of the figure occurs in such pieces as the *Reclining Figure* of 1929 (the piece Smith knew in Graham's collection), where the limbs of the nude figure are realistically represented by lengths of bar. There is a fascinating group of four studies for the large, abstracted *Woman Combing Her Hair* of 1931, which demonstrates González's quite bizarre and arbitrary appropriation of contours from an originally quite conventional and naturalistic motif. A further set of four studies for the *Woman Combing Her Hair* of 1934 develops in response to the earlier image, but also and primarily to the possibilities of using extended lengths of bar and rectangles of plate, not transferring the drawn image to a free spatial structure but seeking an articulation natural to the material in its everyday, functional use. The transitions in the 1934 piece (especially at the hips) and the changes of scale are masterful, and absolutely personal; but the personal is manifest in detail of the handling, rather than in the image or style.

One can find in the sculpture of the Thirties perhaps eight distinct themes with variations, most having their origin in earlier drawn motifs and developed in relation to a particular material—he worked directly in silver and bronze, as well as iron, either "as it comes" (in bar, sheet, etc.) or in the elements (domes, cones, boxes) that González fabricated. Toward the end of the decade there emerge images—such as the *Sickle* figures, *Gothic Man,* and *Cactus Man and*

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Woman—that are González's own inventions, springing from the experience of the earlier metal sculptures, and that come nearest to a personal, distinctive idiom of all González's work. *Gothic Man* I still think is one of his very best pieces—tense, economical, and severe—but it could be argued that as González became clearer about his artistic identity he allowed himself some rather easy solutions. I have heard it said that González was only a great sculptor in the year 1935. Certainly he was at his best when working to distill a conflicting variety of motifs, styles, and kinds of material into internally homogeneous images. Because he was faced with the problem late in life but early in his artistic development, we have a very clear view of the struggle; but it is not his own problem, it is rather the condition of the emergence of the great early modern sculptors (not the painter-sculptors) like Rodin and Brancusi, who rather than arriving with a vocabulary of images to realize in an appropriate material had to work their way through conventional images with their chosen material (clay for Rodin, stone and wood for Brancusi) until the time came when the material would itself start to yield its own "natural" images. González shares with Rodin and Brancusi the experience of an early craft training. Rodin worked as a craftsman and assistant until he was thirty-seven, while Brancusi, whose early skill in woodcarving was almost legendary, did not return to wood to carve such masterpieces as *The Prodigal Son* and *The Sorceress* until he was thirty-nine. It seems as if all three masters needed time to forget their facility and training in the material before each could recover its expressive potential for modern sculpture; but, through character and circumstance, González seems to have left it too late to evolve as completely as did Rodin and Brancusi. Perhaps also the closeness of Picasso, and the consciousness of the debt he owed him, meant that his mission would inevitably be to interpret and extend the gestures of his younger friend and mentor.

Most of González's images of the Thirties can be traced to Picasso, Brancusi, or

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Degas. In the Guggenheim exhibition, it is possible to make direct comparison with the Degas sculptures at the entrance to the Thannhauser Wing, and momentarily one's confidence in González can be shaken in the process. But we are not comparing like with like: obviously González could not make Degas dancers that would equal Degas, any more than he could make Picassos or Brancusis that would equal those masters. A lifetime's practice in carrying out the designs of others could not be erased overnight, if ever. What remains almost miraculous is González's capacity—so late in life—to turn his gift for interpretation as a craftsman to that of interpretation as an artist.

What emerges is the spectacle of an artist unique in the history of the modern movement, whose originality appears almost in spite of himself. The poetry and psychological authenticity of his work come through, but it demands an effort from the spectator to forget the modernist assumption that equates originality with the invention and consistent development of radical styles, and to concentrate on the work itself, the uniqueness of its handling both of material and of space.

For this reason the Guggenheim exhibition is especially welcome at this time. The Picasso sculpture show at Pace last year, and the David Smith exhibitions in Washington, were good to have, certainly, but both artists' work is not only more accessible in public collections but it communicates more readily in reproduction. I can think of few, if any, sculptors whose work it is more necessary to see in order to understand what the sculpture is about. González clearly recognized that he did not have the gift for making an image that would reveal itself completely on first glance, and he did not aim for it. His sculptures give themselves slowly. They need time, patience, and a different kind of attention than we give to the more extrovert art of its period. Paradoxically, in that his sculptures were made almost entirely with tools rather than directly by the hand, González's touch is an essential aspect of his art.[3] Equally sure, and tactful, is his sense of volume. Almost every piece, however linear or planar in construction, exists in an envelope of space that neither sits placidly in space at large nor crudely ruptures it, but somehow seems to set up a vibration between them. The confidence in handling an implied volume with abstract or near abstract components grew with experience, and is the reason why the *Montserrat* works so well: despite the obviousness of the image, we are continually reminded that we are looking not at a solid mass of material but at a skin stretched taut between internal and external space.

The precision and sensitivity of González's handling of the metal skin grew to some extent out of his training as a metalsmith; and there is a sense in which his mature sculpture may be seen as the rejoining of two traditions separated in Europe for some four hundred years: the art of the sculptor and that of the metalsmith.

To my knowledge, between Cellini and González no leading sculptor emerged in Europe who had been trained as a metalsmith. Cellini was the last of a long line, the most distinguished representatives of which were perhaps Ghiberti and Verrochio, whose apprenticeship in the direct handling of metal resulted in a sensitivity to surface that is the opposite of the responsiveness to mass characteristic of the stoneworkers, such as the Pisanos. This intense energizing of surface was central to the metalworker's sensibility, even if the material used was stone, as for example in Verrocchio's *lavabo* in San Lorenzo, Florence. This work is almost entirely encrusted with a pattern of animal, vegetable, and architectural motifs, exuberantly described by Adrian Stokes in *The*

3 In this context, Margit Rowell has been successful in bringing together at the Guggenheim Museum such a well-organized and complete survey, with the inclusion of only one of the posthumous bronze replicas, the circulation of which has served to betray rather than assist González's reputation.

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Quattro Cento.[4] The imagery is that of textured membranes from the natural world—falcon feathers, oak leaves, bat wings, boar and lion masks, reptile scales and claws.

If González's sensibility is very much in this tradition, the imagery suggested by his metal sculpture is not far removed from that of the *lavabo.* For the onlooker confronting González sculpture for the first time without guidance as to how it should be read, I think the dominant association would be with the plant or insect world, rather than with the human, the architectural, or the mechanical. If all modern sculpture is self-portrait, whatever its apparent subject, González's images are perhaps closer, in their simultaneous menace and vulnerability, to the hero of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* than to Picasso's or Brancusi's more robust animal surrogates.

4 *The Quattro Cento*—the eccentric spelling is Stokes's—was published in 1932, and is reprinted in Volume I of *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes,* edited by Lawrence Gowing (Thames and Hudson, 1978).

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Mr. Ludwig goes to Moscow

by Elaine Elizer

A man and woman in their late thirties, dressed in artists' clothing, hold in their hands a double portrait of themselves as Adam and Eve. Naked and slightly idealized, they are depicted in front of what looks like a magnolia tree. Adam stands with an apple in his hands. Eve is about to leave paradise: she steps out of the picture into the male artist's hand, placed safely under her foot. This composition is executed in oil on wood and reminds one of the post-World War I "New Objectivity" paintings or of the figurative paintings of the 1960s and 1970s. It was done, however, in 1980 by Dmitri Dmitrevich Shilinskii, a Moscow artist. It is one of ninety-seven paintings shown recently in the Künstlerhaus in Vienna in an exhibition called "Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art."[1] The exhibition also included five hundred prints and drawings and ten sculptures. It was put together from the collection of Peter Ludwig, the famous West German chocolate manufacturer and art collector who is known in the United States for having amassed an enormous collection of American Photo-realist and Pop art.

Mr. Ludwig's interest in Soviet art has developed recently, as he explains in an interview published in the exhibition's catalogue.[2] In the late 1970s he started collecting East German art. In 1979, in an interview coinciding with the opening of his East German exhibition, he was asked whether he intended to include Soviet art in his collection. He said he was in fact interested, but didn't know that much about it. Upon hearing of Mr. Ludwig's interest, Vladimir Semionov, the Soviet ambassador to West Germany, invited Mr. Ludwig to the Soviet Union. Over the next three years he traveled there twelve times, visiting about four hundred studios and buying more than five hundred works by contemporary Soviet artists (all of them members of the Soviet Artists' Union, to which about seventeen thousand men and women belong). "It is not farfetched," Mr. Ludwig says in the exhibition's catalogue, "to inquire . . . about the origins of socialist realism and about the point of its current development." Ludwig praises Semionov as an art lover and helpful mediator. Semionov in fact introduced Mr. Ludwig to some of the artists personally.

When a German collector, taking advantage of an official invitation, purchases art by the members of the Soviet Artists' Union with the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Trade acting as middlemen, his collection—and any exhibition drawn from it—cannot but be deeply marked by the entire official process. But Mr. Ludwig seems to deny this when he claims, as he does in the catalogue interview, that his show is representative of the art produced in

1 The exhibition will travel to Regensburg, Oslo, Trondheim, Lübeck, Saarbrücken, Mainz, and Aachen—all in West Germany and Norway.

2 *Aspekte Sowjetischer Kunst der Gegenwart,* Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen, 1982.

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the Soviet Union today. If this were true, Shilinskii's *Adam and Eve* would be one of the outstanding achievements of the contemporary Soviet art scene, since it is among the best works in the exhibition. As represented in this exhibition, that scene appears both dull and derivative.

"Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art" is dominated by mediocre figurative painting. It presents a survey of various nineteenth- and twentieth-century artistic styles as reflected in the work of artists painting today in the Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, among other places. One sees feeble reflections of Cézanne, Otto Dix, and Chagall, of the Fauves and Expressionists, and even of Pop-art and Superrealist painters. There are many examples of Socialist Realism, too. Various pictures show Red Square and the Kremlin in different seasons, vistas of festive Moscow with streams of people carrying red flags, old white birches (the incarnation of mother Russia) and golden forests alluding to the season of the Revolution, genre scenes with Lenin, portraits of Lenin, and long queues in front of Lenin's mausoleum. There are representations of poor country folk eagerly reading and writing—"between the battles," as the title explains—and of cheerful peasants preparing "lunch in the fields." There are also symbolic or slightly surrealist compositions, for example, *Brilliant Stars,* in which slender female bodies float around a cosmonaut. Cosmonauts appear in several pictures. In the triptych *Gagarin* by O. Vukolov, the hero is depicted between a rocket going up and a parachute coming down. *Cosmonauts,* a huge canvas by Yuri Konstantinovich Korolev ("an artist of the people," according to the catalogue, and the secretary of the Artists' Union), has a peculiar charm. Whenever a new cosmonaut was flown by the Soviets into space, Korolev would update the picture by painting in the new face over the old. Korolev was obviously adapting to his paintings a practice common in Soviet politics: the rubbing out of the names and faces of people who have fallen out of favor. Most of Mr. Ludwig's Soviet collection is simply kitsch: girls with birds and flowers, men with horses and guns, naïve or folkloric genre scenes and landscapes, sentimental portraits, and symbolic compositions. If they had been painted by American artists, they would be showing on sidewalks around Washington Square instead of touring major museums in Europe.

To see all this mediocre Soviet art is especially painful if one remembers the achievements of Russian art early in this century. The Russian avant-garde, for instance, helped to bring about one of the most original movements of modern art: Constructivism. In the catalogue Mr. Ludwig calls Constructivism an "episode." He is not alone in thinking this. The Soviet authorities themselves have tried to reduce Constructivism to an episode and to obliterate Constructivist art—if not the Constructivists themselves—from cultural memory. Those artists who were lucky enough to survive the Stalinist purges, and those who carry on in the Constructivist tradition today, have in their own country become "dead souls"—forgotten and silent. It is only because the Constructivists' work was brought to the West by collectors like George Costakis and won the attention of museums like the Guggenheim and of galleries like the Gmurzynska Gallery in Cologne that the Constructivists have come to be regarded as something more than episodical figures.

The Constructivists, of course, are not modern Russia's only contribution to the history of twentieth-century art. So famous in the West are Chagall, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Lipchitz, and Soutine, for example, that one tends to forget that these and other artists came from what is now the Soviet Union, although some produced their first mature work in Western Europe before the Revolution took place. Because of the enormous damage that has been done to art in particular and to culture in general in the Soviet Union, there are no artists of such caliber working today on the Soviet art scene. But the situation is not as depressing as the exhibition put together by Mr. Ludwig would suggest, nor is it so divorced from

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the earlier twentieth-century Russian art.

Oleg Kudryashev, for example, an émigré in his early fifties, works in the Constructivist tradition. His recent show at the Riverside Studios in London was highly praised by the critics. In Moscow, the painter Eric Bulatov makes daring and ironically witty pastiches of Socialist Realism. (He earns his living as an illustrator of children's books.) In New York, similar kinds of pastiches are being done by émigré artists Komar and Melamid. In 1982 an exhibition entitled "Russian Samizdat Art," organized by Rimma and Valery Gerlovin (an émigré couple from Moscow), was shown at the Franklin Furnace in New York and at the Washington Project for the Arts. It presented a number of works of Conceptual art by Soviet artists. Other artists in the Soviet Union today—like the Moscow group "Mukhomor," formed in the late Seventies—are drawn to Neo-Dadaism, to Happenings, and to multimedia art. They perform and show in parks, private apartments, or in such semi-official galleries as the Gorkom Komitet Grafikov. Of course, the work of nonconformist Soviet artists—banished underground, published in *samizdat,* and only sometimes smuggled out of the country—is not very well known in the West. But it exists. It was documented in the Venice Biennale in 1977 and it can be seen in *A-JA: Unofficial Russian Art Review,* a journal that has been appearing in the West since 1979. Contrary to Mr. Ludwig's observation, the influence of the Constructivist tradition remains clearly visible in the work of many of these artists.

Mr. Ludwig's exhibition puts one in mind of Mikhail Bulgakov's great novel *The Master and Margarita,* in which Bulgakov describes with unsurpassed irony the Writers' Union in the Soviet Union. Not only does he deride the Union, but he shows the tragic consequences for a great artist working outside the Union, whose life is so different from the comfortable "creative" life lived by its untalented members. His point is that the price of being a "master" is, at best, that of living outside the official system and the benefits it confers. At worst, it is having one's art and life destroyed. Though things are less harsh today in the Soviet Union than in Stalin's time, "masters" still suffer hardship. They are not among the mass of Union members, of course. The Soviet authorities try by every means to convince the world that the production of the members of the Artists' Union constitutes the whole of art in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Ludwig makes the same claim. Fortunately, his exhibition contradicts his words. At their best, the works of the artists represented in "Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art" show the members of the Artists' Union escaping from the reality of their country, taking refuge in their private paradise of a Moscow studio or a "creative" holiday at Yalta. It is only artists in the underground and in exile who try to deal with the actual conditions of Soviet art and life today.

"Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art" stands in startling contrast to another collection of Mr. Ludwig's—his collection of contemporary American art, which caused so much controversy and comment when it toured Europe in the Seventies, presenting such artists as Duane Hanson, Ed Kienholz, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, John de Andrea, and George Segal to many Europeans for the first time. Now divided among several European museums, that collection still leaves a deep impression. The works are straightforward, often shocking and cruel: they picture a degraded world and a society deeply disturbed by excessive consumption and extreme poverty—police beat blacks, women sell their bodies, and American soldiers enjoy themselves and die in Vietnam. The Ludwig collection of Soviet art, by contrast, portrays Soviet life today as peaceful, harmonious, and idyllic. Afghanistan and Poland do not exist. There are no queues (except those in front of the Lenin Mausoleum) and no labor camps. If a picture records death and destruction, its title locates the scene elsewhere—for example, *The Spanish Tragedy.*

When one compares Mr. Ludwig's American to his Soviet collection, the thoughts

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of one East European art historian come to mind. (He cannot be named lest his position be compromised.) There are two kinds of cruelty, he says: real cruelty and the cruelty of art, which warns and purifies. Wherever cruelty is exercised in the service of building a new world—as it is in the Soviet Union—sweet and pretty art is prescribed and any depiction of violence is labeled "degenerate" and suppressed. Such art alludes to a reality that must be denied.

Mr. Ludwig's exhibition is an attempt to deny that Soviet official art is indeed a lie. He even maintains that the "seriousness, the morality and the faith" of the Russian icon live on in the "nobility and the holiness of the secularized world of the Communist Soviet Union." Nothing of this holy spirit can, however, be detected in the works he has chosen. The pictures are dull and empty (even if the expensively produced catalogue says otherwise). In this sense, and only in this sense, "Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art" is a useful show. It provides a glimpse of the art of privileged Union members. And it shows the price described by Bulgakov: the price of mediocrity, of never becoming a master.

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Theater

Want in the midst of *Plenty*

by Mimi Kramer

This year in New York theater, America's love affair with Great Britain became blush-makingly explicit. At one point this season no fewer than eight new British plays were running on Broadway and Off-Broadway. Thus, New Yorkers were able to indulge openly in an activity they are usually confined to practicing behind closed doors with a consenting public television station: worshipping of the charms and graces of the British stage tradition. Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* came to New York over a year ago under the direction of Tommy Tune and never left. Joseph Papp brought David Hare's *Plenty* to New York and when it moved uptown to Broadway in January, Churchill's *Top Girls* replaced it at the Public Theater. Meanwhile, Julian Mitchell's *Another Country* arrived at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven.

America's respect for British theater is in no sense inappropriate or undeserved. When it doesn't stem from snobbery or bookish pretention, such respect derives from a genuine thirst for the pleasure of good theater, something that, in the long run, the British produce far more of than we do. Unfortunately, few of the British plays in New York this season offer much in the way of artistic merit.

They do offer something else, however: a chance to see what happens to British theater when its political messages are put before an American audience.

Not that all London theater is political. Every season London is full of comedies of modern manners and light farce, like the plays of Simon Gray, whose *Butley* and *Quartermaine's Terms* Americans will be familiar with, and Alan Ayckbourne, who is perhaps best known here for his *The Norman Conquests*. Plays of this type tend to be regarded by the cognoscenti with the mild regret and resignation with which the English contemplate the advent of rain, war, or the American tourists in August. In addition, however, at a rate of about one or two per season, the London stage produces plays which have "a social context." These are treated by the London critics with a respect that amounts to reverence: they are serious drama as opposed to mere entertainment because they address themselves to social issues. For example, Julian Mitchell's *Another Country*—a play about what life was like for homosexuals at an English boarding school in the 1930s—won this year's SWET Award (Society of West End Theatres) for Best Play. Caryl Churchill's plays have gained her a widespread reputation as a serious feminist playwright, and both she and David Hare are regarded as uncompromising social critics. Hare's plays are not always as popular among the critics, but he is always taken seriously—very seriously. Even when he offends, he offends on a grand scale.

I went to see *Plenty* in New York on the night of the big snowfall in February. It took some doing to get there: leaving about an

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hour and a half to get to the theater, I arrived about ten minutes before curtain, which was just as well. Perusing the program, evidently, was going to take some doing, too. "PLENTY," it read, "takes place over a period of nineteen years in the following sequence":

	ACT I		
Sc. 1	Knightsbridge	Easter	1962
Sc. 2	St. Benoit	November	1943
Sc. 3	Brussels	June	1947
Sc. 4	Pimlico	September	1947
Sc. 5	Festival of Britain	May	1951
Sc. 6	Pimlico	December	1952
Sc. 7	Knightsbridge	October	1956
	ACT II		
Sc. 8	Knightsbridge	July	1961
Sc. 9	Whitehall	January	1962
Sc. 10	Knightsbridge	the day before Easter	1962
Sc. 11	Blackpool	June	1962
Sc. 12	St. Benoit	August	1944

When the lights came up, a stage set was trying valiantly to suggest the empty shell of a very expensive house, and the actress Kate Nelligan was sitting on a packing case, smoking. Stony-faced, she simply oozed disapproval. Another young woman was cheerfully digging into Chinese food, and in the middle of the room a body lay unappealingly on a dirty mattress. "Tell him I left with nothing that was his," says Susan Traherne, the character Miss Nelligan is playing. "I just walked out." Then she walks out. Presumably from this point on the play is going to be in some way an explanation of this scene and of the expression on Kate Nelligan's face at curtain-up.

Scene 2 takes us to provincial France in November of 1943, that well-remembered time when so many of England's schoolchildren were sent across the Channel to join the ranks of the Resistance movement. There we see Susan at seventeen. Although she is good at playing spy, she doesn't have a way with people. In a squabble over a supplies-drop, she tries to pull rank on a French Resistance fighter and has to be helped out by her colleague, an Englishman who has just parachuted to her acquaintance and who answers to the enchanting sobriquet of Codename Lazar. Susan, when the Frenchman leaves, becomes hysterical. Codename Lazar lends a friendly shoulder and makes a few disconnected observations about the sky, the nature of the universe, and bicycle clips. Susan will never forget him.

From what we can gather, Susan's main problem seems to be a rather elitist view of war work: she cannot forget her years in the Resistance (and what we have seen of Susan in the Resistance is all we shall ever see), and she makes it quite clear that anyone who wasn't in the Resistance simply missed the War. In Scene 3 (1947, if you'll remember), she meets her future husband, Raymond Brock, at the British Embassy in Brussels, where he is an undersecretary. She shares some of her views:

> People in our organization . . . those of us who went through this kind of war, I think we do have something in common. It's a kind of impatience, we're rather intolerant, we don't suffer fools. And so we get rather restless in England, the people who stayed behind seem childish and a little silly.

Perhaps the lack of enthusiasm that *Plenty* encountered when it opened in London—it was almost an overnight disaster—had less to do with Mr. Hare's "political views" and more to do with the stupidity of such remarks. Certainly there are people in England still living who remember the War a little differently (Mr. Hare is about thirty-five), people who would have some difficulty generating any interest in a heroine who can say things like this uncontradicted.

Through the rest of the play we watch Susan Traherne alternately reminisce and browbeat everyone who shares the stage with her and who stands between her and what she wants. In 1947 Susan is working in a shipping office back in England, feeling discontented, still thinking about Codename Lazar and consequently being unkind

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to Raymond Brock. In 1951 she is working for the Festival of Britain and thinking of going into advertising. Still bored, she browbeats a young East Ender named Mick into helping her have a child. "Deep down I'd do the whole damn thing myself," Susan says. "But there we are. You're second best." In 1952 their attempts have proven unsuccessful and Susan is even more discontented: it has occurred to her that advertising is merely professional lying. When Mick comes round with a bottle of wine, Susan intones "You don't understand the figures in my mind," and she shoots him.

In 1956 Susan is married to Brock and making his life a living hell. At a diplomatic dinner she throws a very sketchy tantrum about Suez that ends in a tearful reminiscence about the Resistance; she breaks up the party by publicly humiliating her husband and being rude to everyone all round. In Scene 8 she refuses to return with her husband to his post in Iran, causing him to be recalled. Susan then goes to Whitehall to try browbeating the Foreign Office because her husband's career doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. "I'm very keen he should not suffer on my account," she says. "I think you have destroyed my husband, you see." Somehow, this rings a little hollow.

In Scene 10 Susan is on the verge of a full-scale breakdown, timed, she indicates, to coincide with reduced hospital staffing for Easter. Brock finally delivers a judgment:

> Your life is selfish, self-interested gain. That's the most charitable interpretation to hand. You claim to be protecting some personal ideal, always at a cost of almost infinite pain to everyone around you. You are selfish, brutish, unkind . . .

At the end of the speech the theater is almost electrically charged with the suppressed energy of an audience that longs to applaud but knows it would be rude to do so. Susan goes on to tear the house apart, bestowing whatever will be left on her friend, the Chinese-food-enthusiast from Scene 1. And so we're back where we started.

For the last scene, Hare takes us back to France just after it's been freed from German occupation. For the first time in the play, Susan smiles: "There will be days and days and days like this," she says. It is a last bid for empathy and it's a nice thought; but it comes too late.

Perhaps David Hare really did have an idea which he wanted to dramatize. Perhaps he meant for Susan to be an allegorical figure—like Maria Braun in Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*—representing England. In that case the play is curiously obscure: the purpose of allegory, after all, is to explicate, not to mystify. Or perhaps he wanted to depict a certain type of woman heroically devoted to a life of poetic nostalgia. If so, it might have been a good idea to give the audience some sense of Susan's character, some glimpse of the poetry of her vision, some hint of her heroic stature. It might have helped to let us see some of her vanished ideals being forged (if he was going to haul us back in time anyway) or even let us in on the big secret of what those ideals were. But Hare has not bothered to give us even the remotest idea of what makes Susan tick. Consequently, the sum total of one's involvement in his play is to ask oneself occasionally: "What is this woman's problem?" Luckily, Hare sees the "ambiguity" of Susan's character as "central to the idea of the play." In his production notes he explains: "In the act of judging the audience learns something about its own values." Considering the play's own failings, that sounds a lot like passing the buck.

In Hare's view, *Plenty* "obviously implies that wartime ideals were thrown away in the peace, during the years of the Conservative government and that we made particular fools of ourselves during the Suez crisis. It also attacks good English institutions like the Foreign Office." But *Plenty* does nothing of the sort. Oh, it *alludes* to "wartime ideals," just as it *alludes* to Suez; it also suggests that diplomats are a little stuffy, a little nationalistic, and a little prone to wearing pinstripes. But if David Hare actually knows anything about the social, economic, or po-

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litical context of the postwar years beyond the words "ration book," he keeps remarkably quiet about it. The only thing it "obviously implies" is that with fourteen actors, twelve scene changes, a time sequence that runs J-A-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-K-L-B (I think I got that right), and a play that jets it between Knightsbridge, Brussels, Whitehall, Blackpool, and France, it is possible to say very little indeed.

"A lot of people told me [*Plenty*] would never make it here because it's so English," Hare said in a *New York Times* interview (December 29, 1982). He has his own interpretation for why the play has been so popular here. In New York, where audiences are "starved for plays that have some social context," he finds that his "politics don't get in the way of people's reaction to my work the way they do in England." That's putting it mildly. It might be more accurate to say that for an American audience Mr. Hare's politics hardly come through at all.

What Britons saw in *Plenty* and what Americans focus on are two different things. In Scene 5, for example, Susan Traherne stands on the Thames Embankment watching for fireworks from the South Bank in celebration of the Festival of Britain. This scene is meant to convey some sense of Susan's disillusionment with the optimism of the postwar years. For a London audience, it might have held some poignance. At the National, after all, the audience would be sitting right there in the very triumph of postwar redevelopment whose opening Susan is attending in the play. As the audience watched Susan, she would have seemed to be watching them or watching for some vision of the future in which they were meant to feel they had failed her. At any distance from Waterloo Bridge, however, the scene is meaningless. And I'm sure David Hare would be appalled to learn how few members of his New York audience had any idea of what the Festival of Britain was all about.

At the end of Scene 7 there is a pivotal speech. Having pooped the diplomatic party Susan turns to her husband and two remain-

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ing guests. With the wild satisfaction of an avenging angel about to go in for the kill, she says:

> Now, there was dinner. I made some more dinner . . . . A little ham. And chicken. And some pheasants in the fridge. And I can get twelve bottles of claret from the cellar. Why not? There is plenty.
>
> Shall we eat again?

It is one of the most forceful moments in the play, for sheer volume anyway. It gives us the play's ironic title and brings down the first-act curtain. Surely in this speech Hare wanted us to feel the ideological vacuity of Suez emblematized in Susan's scathing characterization of mindless gluttony.

"Weird, isn't it?" I overheard a young woman comment to her friend in the interval. "Yeah," a young man agreed. "It's kind of—what's the word?—episodic. Not very well put together. Entertaining on a primitive level, though. The best part was when they started talking about all that pheasant and claret, you know?" The young woman laughed. "Yeah," she said. "Claret. That's port, right?"

I think David Hare is kidding himself if he thinks that Americans care about his heroine's existential malaise, even if a metaphor for England's. I think he would be chagrined if he knew that most Americans alive in 1955 are much clearer on the details of Princess Margaret's affair with Peter Townsend than they are on the details of Suez. Americans don't turn to David Hare because they are "starved for plays that have some social context." They go to see his play for all that port and pheasant.

Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* originated at London's Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square (about fifty black-tie lengths from Fiorucci's), where both Churchill and Hare have been resident playwrights for Max Stafford-Clark's Joint Stock Theatre Company. When *Cloud Nine* opened in London in 1980 it created quite a stir as a piece of feminist theater. The London *Times* wrote solemnly about its ideas on "role-playing" and "the persistence of supposedly discarded moral imperatives." In *The New Statesman* Benedict Nightengale called it "a wry critique of sexual compartmentalisation that continues to ruffle the brain even after you have seen it."

Cloud Nine is about as "wry" as Jerry Lewis; its feminism, moreover, is rather tepid. With great fuss and bother it arrives at the conclusion that women have feelings, too, hardly an idea likely to provide New York theatergoers with any rude awakening. The first act is set in colonial Africa. The characters march out to front-of-stage singing a patriotic anthem: "Come one and all for England." Between verses they sing their introductions: Clive, "a father to the natives here / And father to my family so dear"; Betty, Clive's wife (played by a man), "I am a man's creation as you see / And what men want is what I want to be"; Clive's black servant (played by a white), "My skin is black but oh my soul is white . . . / What white men want is what I want to be." There's also Clive's nine-year-old son Edward (played by a woman), Victoria, the daughter of the family (played by a doll or puppet), a mother-in-law, and a governess. The dialogue is really not much better than the introductions:

> That's a brave girl. So today has been all right? No fainting? No hysteria?
>
> A boy has no business having feelings.
>
> Edward, I've told you before, dolls are for girls.

A seventh-grade revue at a New York private school would produce wittier social satire. An Alan Quartermaine-type explorer joins them, as does a free-spirited and independent widow named Mrs. Saunders. There is much joy on the verandah as characters (including the children) go about pleasuring one another in every possible permutation.

Churchill sets her second half in contemporary London, with mostly the same char-

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acters. A hundred years have passed, but the family has aged only twenty-five years. Everything happens in the second half just as you would expect: middle-aged Betty is taking the great step forward and leaving Clive; Victoria is married to a man who says things like, "I'm not like whatever percentage of American men have become impotent as a direct result of women's liberation, which I am totally in favor of, more I sometimes think than you are yourself"; and Edward is having boyfriend troubles. Meanwhile a new character, a lesbian named Lin, has her eye on Victoria. The two of them end up sharing board and bed with Edward and Mum begs to be allowed to join the ménage.

The only really interesting thing about *Cloud Nine* as a play is the idea of using actors explicitly to represent what they are not—a different race or sex—in order to express conflicted feelings and the betrayal of one's nature. It's a terrific idea and (with the right actors) it works. But more justification is needed for Churchill's other innovation—the time-warp trick—than simply her desire to make what is becoming a familiar point on the English stage: that Victorian values linger on in contemporary social attitudes to make women and homosexuals the spiritual heirs to the oppressed victims of the Empire. After all, there was no reason why the characters in Act II have to be our friends from Act I. They could have easily been descendants of the family and made the same point. Such a breach of convention without a purpose begins to look like shoddy craftsmanship—or sheer perversity.

Churchill did make visual use of the time-warp trick, but apparently without understanding. In the final scene of the play, middle-aged Betty sits on a park bench alone. From upstage right a character from Act I enters and sits down behind her. It is Betty's mother, Maud. "Let Mrs. Saunders be a warning to you Betty," says the Victorian mother working a piece of lace. "I know what it is to be unprotected." "But I want to be dangerous," Betty replies. In Act I Betty's husband Clive had been attracted by a Mrs. Saunders because she was a "dangerous" woman. And because the woman Betty wants to be and the woman her mother warns her against becoming are both a woman whom the actress now playing Betty played in Act I, the ghostly exchange is strangely poignant where otherwise it might be maudlin. Betty's mother goes and Betty is alone again. Presently another figure comes along: this time it is Gerry, her son's homosexual lover, an unhappy youth of rather strident unkindness. In a bold spirit of middle-aged adventure, Betty tries to pick the boy up and is, of course, turned down. Because the boy now playing Gerry is the same actor who played Betty (in drag) in Act I, again there is a charming sadness in the mixture of noncomprehension and unaccustomed kindness with which the boy rebuffs and disappoints the woman who, in our visual memory, he once was. In both these scenes it is the memory of a persona seen once long ago that carries the scene's didactic and emotional force. It is the only place where Churchill manages to make a point with any grace and it is the only piece of good theater in an otherwise underwrought play. It is also entirely dependent on a particular doubling of the roles. For this reason, it is distressing to find in Caryl Churchill's production notes that, "The doubling can be done in any way that seems right for any particular production," and that she herself prefers a different doubling scheme.

If Caryl Churchill's social insights seem either commonplace or else like the zeal of unaccustomed feminism, that is probably because the women's movement in Britain is about ten years behind the times. Anyone who wants to know why, however, need only pop in on Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. If *Cloud Nine* seems old-fashioned, *Top Girls* is positively reactionary. It moves inexplicably between an employment agency in London, a drab house in Suffolk, and a surreal dinner party with great women sellouts from art, literature, and history, and tells the story of Marlene, a successful career-woman with all the earmarks of the Girl Who Has Every-

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thing: looks, brains, a public-school accent, and the ability to keep abreast of three different conversations while ordering the right wine. It turns out that Marlene has a working-class background as well, and a feeble-minded, illegitimate daughter whom she has left behind in Suffolk for her drudge-like sister to rear. By the end of the play we have been forced to a stern judgment on Marlene, the woman who fulfills herself by abandoning her weaker sisters and collaborating with the capitalist world of men.

I don't think it would be possible in America today to imply criticism of a woman's choice of her career over motherhood without provoking a good deal of controversial comment. For instance, when Meryl Streep appeared callous for abandoning her son to the care of Dustin Hoffman in *Kramer vs. Kramer,* America wondered whether the film might not be anti-feminist. Similarly, when *Top Girls* opened in New York, a heated debate broke out in *The Village Voice* over whether the play betrayed feminist ideology.

But when *Top Girls* opened in London, the critics called it a "fiercely feminist play." Benedict Nightengale's column in *The New Statesman* went to great lengths to deny

> that there is something in the female temperament innately alien to the dramatic form: theatrical work is too external, too rectilinear, too rigidly structured a means of expression for creative minds that tend to be subtler, more curvilinear and therefore better suited to the novel.

I wouldn't expect to see a sentence like that in any American publication north of Miami. The fact that it appears in *The New Statesman* suggests how far English feminist politics are from their American counterpart.

Top Girls, of course, is really less about feminism than about a conflict which Churchill sees between feminism and socialism. Marlene is rotten to the core because she asserts the value of the individual over the group. She is also, apparently, meant to represent Margaret Thatcher. Accordingly, she spouts monetarism and Thatcherite politics to show us that an interest in bettering oneself, in aspiring to transcend one's working-class roots and become middle class, goes hand-in-hand with an "I'm-All-Right" Tory attitude. Seven out of fifteen reviews of *Top Girls* used the most virulent polite insult in the English vocabulary to describe Marlene: "pushy." Given that and the implications of Churchill's message—that the good sister is the one who stays true to her working-class roots—is it any wonder that the class system in England persists? Certainly American audiences are not likely to be made anxious by *Top Girls'* notions of class betrayal, any more than they are likely to be impressed by *Cloud Nine*'s denigration of Victorian values, or *Plenty*'s condemnation of postwar consumerism. For Americans the social and political *pensées* of Churchill and Hare must seem about as revolutionary as maisonettes.

Julian Mitchell's *Another Country* is another play that took London by storm. Based on the Guy Burgess/Anthony Blunt affair, *Another Country,* like *Cloud Nine,* points an accusing finger at traditional English values, nurtured on the playing fields of Eton. It suggests that these values linger on to oppress homosexuals (and anyone else who doesn't conform or play the game) and ultimately force them to become Russian spies.

Because all Gothic buildings look pretty much the same from the inside, the set for *Another Country* might just as well be a set for *Charley's Aunt.* We are at an Eton-like public school and our hero is Guy Bennett, a Burgess-like fellow, a charming but morally vapid boy committed to little but pleasure and witticisms. Because Bennett is a homosexual, he doesn't really fit in at school. His only friend is another black-sheep, Tommy Judd, a caricature of a Marxist, who is drawn to Bennett as a fellow outcast in spite of the latter's persistent refusal to take any interest in politics or the problems of the world. When the play opens Bennett is gaz-

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ing out the window of the library through binoculars, boy-watching. At the end of the scene he will again pick up the binoculars only to see the body of a boy being carried out of the Chapel, a boy named Martineau who has hung himself rather than face the consequences and shame of having been discovered in a homosexual encounter.

The rest of the play seems oddly unpreoccupied with the plight of poor Martineau, victim of the public school system; it is hardly even dominated by his image. Instead, Act II plunges us into what *Time Out* called the "densely political" issues of prefects and an organization called Twenty-Two, which Bennett has been waiting for "ever since my first day at prepper." A boy named Devenish, it seems, is leaving because of the Martineau affair, which means that Fowler, the whip-happy prefect whom everyone hates, "may be going to stay on," as another boy, this one named Menzies, informs Bennett. Bennett is stunned. "I thought that might bring you to your senses," Menzies says grimly.

For Americans, who probably have a hard time telling Devenish from Delahay, the full drama of the situation may be lost. Evidently Devenish's departure will leave the school (or is it the house?) "a prefect short" and "the House Man can't possibly afford to have two senior men who aren't prefects," which means that Fowler will be put in as head of house, and if Fowler's head of house then Bennett won't be in Twenty-Two. So Martineau's death becomes the catalyst for a searching reassessment of values. Tommy ("I can't be against the class system *and* a prefect. Even you must see that!") Judd decides to compromise his principles for the good of the house (or is it school?) because Fowler is "absolutely objectionable." In the end, though, Devenish is bribed to stay with an offer of being in Twenty-Two, so the dangers of Fowler are successfully obviated. But in a scene of chilling irony and betrayal Menzies announces to Bennett that "Devenish is going to be my Number Two." "You bastard," says Bennett. "Don't you dare call me by my Christian name. Ever." In what the *Guardian* called "the play's incisive last scene," Bennett is suddenly driven to ask "How many unemployed are there?" As the lights go down our hero is cracking open a volume of *Das Kapital* and we hear a chorus of boys' voices raised in the dawning anthem:

> And there's another country
> I've heard of long ago
> Most dear to them that love her
> Most great to them that know . . . .
> And soul by soul and silently
> Her shining bounds increase,
> And her ways are ways of gentleness
> And all her paths are peace.

Another Country is a meretricious play. It is dishonest, and stupidly so. While claiming to indict the English public-school system and its values, the play can scarcely hide its trembling excitement as it lingers lovingly over the intricacies of the way of life it sets itself up to condemn. So intent is Mitchell on depicting public-school values and concerns, he almost forgets to criticize them.

Like the other three "political" plays from England in New York this season, *Another Country* has an interest in undercutting or questioning certain basic social values. Like *Plenty* and *Cloud Nine* specifically, *Another Country* tries to force the audience to a rejection of postwar optimism or of the virtues that went to make the Empire by turning the figure of the nonconformist into a sort of half-baked tragic hero: the victim of society, noble because he is different. To the English, the advocacy of nonconformity may seem daring or insidious; to Americans, however, bred on Twain, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau, praise of the nonconformist is so conventional as to seem almost a national pastime, like bowling. The nonconformist himself is perhaps the figure in whom our culture has come closest to producing a patron saint.

In English social and cultural attitudes there still persists a general and widespread respect for values, traditions, and institu-

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tions. That is what these plays are rebelling against. But in America, authority has no special sanction, or inviolability; it never has had. Authority in America has always been seen as something that exists to be questioned.

Perhaps from this fact stems our basic fascination with the style and outlooks of the English upper classes. We adore languid young men, like the hero of Julian Mitchell's play, who say things like, "I bore myself practically to extinction. I did so hope I might be mildly amusing to my friends." We adore the subtleties of social commerce made possible by a class system we have never known. We adore the naïve and antique spirit of the Empire satirized in *Cloud Nine* when the British colonial discovers homosexual proclivities in his explorer friend: "I cannot keep a secret like this. Rivers will be named after you; it's unthinkable." In *Plenty,* when Susan Traherne meets Raymond Brock for the first time, he makes a quip on his superior's name, which happens to be "Darwin":

> The mission all think it's God's joke. God getting his own back by dashing off a modern Darwin who is in every aspect less advanced than the last.

Susan makes a big point of not laughing, and Brock apologizes. "I'm sorry," he says. "We sit about in the evenings and polish our jokes." It is a sharp slap administered to the limp wrist of facile British cleverness. It also happens to be the line that gets the biggest laugh all evening from a New York audience, the "bad" joke, that is. I'm afraid we adore "polished" humor, too.

The irony, in the end, is that we probably go to see plays by Caryl Churchill, David Hare, and Julian Mitchell in order to catch a glimpse of the very characteristics of contemporary British society they put on display to mock, the very values they despise and reject. Though the Max Stafford-Clark's of this world would probably trade in their hyphens rather than admit it, for us these plays might just as well be Terence Rattigan and Noel Coward.

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Books

"The Englishness of England"

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

Reviewing *The English World*[1] in the *Times Literary Supplement,* the historian Theodore Zeldin wrote that it confirmed his view that "a national perspective cannot be sustained in historical study much longer," that nations are not, and never were, "distinct entities." "All our instincts tell us that there is something different between a German and an Italian, but then all our instincts tell us that the earth is flat." If that analogy were correct, we should all be flat-earthers now. For it is not our instincts alone but history itself that tells us there is indeed "something different" between a German and an Italian—and something different between both of them and an Englishman.

Were it not for the tendency among some historians to belittle and even deny the idea of nationality, the present book—folio-sized, beautifully printed, and lavishly illustrated—might simply take its place among the more worthy coffee-table books of the season. As it is, it assumes a larger significance. The truisms of one time become the bold affirmations of another. The very title, *The English World: History, Character, and People,* is a challenge to the "new historian," for whom the idea of an "English world" is as outmoded as the idea of "character." And the brief introduction by the editor, Robert Blake, is a wanton provocation, starting with a quotation from Churchill to Ribbentrop, the German ambassador on the eve of the war, "England is a curious country and few foreigners can understand her mind," and concluding with the hope that the reader will gain a better understanding of "the nature of English civilization and of its impact upon the rest of the world." There are those who would find in that last sentence intimations of the superiority of "English civilization" (words they would be sure to put in quotation marks), even intimations of a cultural and political imperialism.

Lord Acton, who was as wary of the idea of nationality as he was of the idea of race, never doubted that there was such a thing as "national character": "Nobody doubts it who knows schools or armies." Nor did he doubt the idea of "civilization." On the contrary, he gave to civilization what he took away from nationality. "The process of civilization depends on transcending Nationality . . . . Influences which are accidental yield to those which are rational." Since Acton's time, we have seen the idea of nationality vulgarized and debased, pressed into the service of a brutal nationalism. But we have also seen how dependent civilization itself is on national character, which is an essential ingredient of nationality; so far from "transcending" nationality, civilization more often seems to reflect it. Whatever other circumstances affect the nature of a particular civilization—geography, technol-

1 *The English World: History, Character, and People,* edited by Robert Blake. Harry N. Abrams, 268 pages, $50

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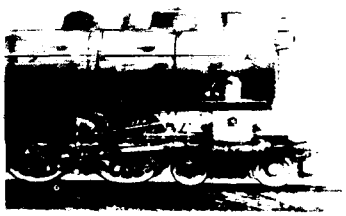

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ogy, economics, religion, politics, war, social relations, and all the other conditions and contingencies the historian can invoke to account for the differences between peoples—something remains that is not accounted for, some quality that may indeed be the product of everything else but that is not reducible to anything else, some quality that—on the average, in the aggregate, and over the long run—distinguishes a people and its civilization from other peoples and civilizations. For want of a better word one is left with the idea of nationality.

This volume is a tribute, sometimes unwitting, to that idea. Edited by Lord Blake, author of an important biography of Disraeli and a history of the Conservative Party, formerly a Conservative Member of Parliament and now Provost of Queen's College, Oxford, it might be expected to reflect the political disposition of its editor were it not for the fact that it includes among its contributors other leading British historians who do not share Lord Blake's political views. Some of these contributors do not share his view of what constitutes "the Englishness of England," as the introductory chapter is entitled, and some do not address themselves to the subject at all. Yet the effect of the whole is to reinforce one's sense of the unmistakable "Englishness" of the English.

This is not an entirely celebratory volume. If Blake makes much of the individualism that he regards as the most distinctive, valuable, and enduring feature of the English character, he also comments on some of the less agreeable, and no less enduring, aspects of that individualism. He cites the Venetian ambassador to the court of Henry VII who remarked upon the peculiar English custom of boarding out children at the age of seven or eight to serve as apprentices or servants with other families for as long as eight years, after which they were expected to make their own way, assisted by their patrons rather than their parents. The ambassador had been told that this was done so that the children would learn better manners than they would at home. But he himself was convinced that it was because the parents would be better served by strangers than by their own children and at less cost, since they would not have to feed servants as well as they might feel obliged to feed their own family. Blake points out that this custom prefigured the boarding schools of more recent times, to which boys of "teddy-bear age" were sent for three-quarters of the year. It was a custom conducive to much anxiety and insecurity—and conducive, too, Blake observes, to social mobility, both upward and downward, as younger sons were sent out into the world with the clear understanding that they were to seek their fortunes.

Several contributors point to social mobility as one of the distinguishing marks of the English: the absence of a caste system (the grandson of a duke who might be a plain Mr.), the bestowal of titles for public service, the intermarriage of wealth and birth and of mercantile and landed wealth, the exclusion of knights from the House of Lords (thus precluding the kind of "nobility of blood" that existed on the continent). Others comment upon the typical English response to change, the instinctive habit of preserving the old in the midst of the new. Thus "England's green and pleasant land," Richard Muir points out, was never quite destroyed even after the radical transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The villages in some parts of north England, for example, are still set out in a fashion that might date from the Conquest. One might cite as well the English predilection for private houses in the heart of the metropolis, or the passion for flowers and gardens that defies urbanization. "Throughout this story," Muir remarks, "the landscape historian is confronted by the two key themes of his calling: continuity and change."

These two themes confront any historian of England, whatever his subject. Indeed they make it impossible for a historian in one area—social, political, economic, cultural, religious—to ply his trade indepen-

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dent of the others, for it is precisely the continuity in one realm that facilitates change in another. One of the great questions for the economic historian is why it was England rather than any other country that had the distinction of being the "first industrial nation." The answer is to be found not only in the availability of capital, technology, natural resources, and the like, but also in England's unique polity, society, culture, and religion. Perhaps the most significant fact about the first industrial nation is that it was also the oldest parliamentary nation; thus it had the political stability and harmony essential to economic progress. And its parliament, like its economy, was peculiarly accommodating, capable of embracing the new without abandoning the old, "democratizing" for example the House of Commons, while retaining the House of Lords, and eventually "meritocratizing" the House of Lords, at least in part (always in part) by creating life peerages in place of hereditary titles.

The conjunction of continuity and change explains the ability of the English to tolerate, indeed thrive on, contradictions and anomalies. Blake's characterization of the English tradition as "libertarian individualism" strikes a wrong note precisely because it is too rigorous, too consistent; one wants a formula that will incorporate individualism with tradition, liberty with community. Asa Briggs quotes Tocqueville's puzzlement over one of the many contradictions in the English character: "I cannot completely understand how the spirit of association and the spirit of exclusion came to be so highly developed in the same people, and often to be so intimately combined." Tocqueville's examples were the club, which was cohesive for its members and exclusive in relation to non-members, and the family: "See how families divide up when the birds are able to leave the nest." That amalgam of association and dissociation, Tocqueville was convinced, characterized most of England's civil and political institutions. Other commentators have dwelt on other manifestations of the same contrariness. In his chapter, "The English: Custom and Character," Briggs cites the contradictions inherent in a thoroughly pluralistic society containing an intricate network of voluntary associations; the immense local and regional variety exhibited within a relatively small geographical area; the "paradoxes of progress" evident in the simultaneous enthusiasm for and resistance to technological change; the ambivalence toward money-making even at the height of the Industrial Revolution and among the most enterprising industrialists; the prominence of the aristocracy and gentry well into the nineteenth century; a class system that has been properly characterized as open in a society that is acutely class-conscious; the coexistence of individuality and deference, eccentricity and conformity, secularism and evangelicalism, spiritual aspirations and material comforts.

The *via media* of the Anglican Church, as Edward Norman describes it, is similarly distinctive—distinctively national well before the Reformation, and distinctively moderate, conciliatory, pragmatic, tolerant of difference. If blood was spilled in the course of the development of that *via media*, it was far less blood than was spilled in the religious wars on the continent. To be sure, the much vaunted English temper of moderateness needs qualification, as every other generalization does. Briggs cites Geoffrey Gorer's statement in 1955 that the English people are "among the most peaceful, gentle, courteous and orderly populations that the civilized world has ever seen," football crowds, for example, being "as orderly as church meetings"—an unfortunate example, as recent football games have demonstrated. Briggs himself reminds us of the London riots of 1736, 1768, and 1780, which gave London the reputation of being more turbulent than Paris. But that reputation hardly survived the French Revolution of 1789—or 1830, or 1848, or 1870. Even by nonrevolutionary standards, riots in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not all that riotous. Elsewhere another historian, T. A. Critchley, has

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commented on the incidence of violence in modern England: "A nation which commemorates 10th May, 1768, when about half a dozen rioters were killed, as the 'massacre' of St. George's Fields, 15th August, 1819, when eleven people were killed, as the 'massacre' of Peterloo, and 13th November, 1887, when no one was killed, as 'Bloody Sunday,' measures its public violence by high standards."

If *The English World* seems to endorse so many clichés, it is partly because clichés, as another cliché has it, have the habit of being true, and partly because a work of this kind tends to elicit simple truths. It is always fascinating to watch a serious historian compress in twenty or twenty-five pages a subject that would normally occupy a volume or more. Each of the contributors to this book is fully aware of all the scholarly monographs and revisionist theses that amend, qualify, and call into question every statement he makes. Each of them, indeed, is the author of just such monographs and theses. What is impressive is that in spite of the temptation to show how much he knows, how subtle and complicated, original, and interesting his views are, each has nobly resisted that temptation. Abridgement, condensation, summation, here as in all historical works, inevitably entail simplification and therefore distortion. But a much more serious distortion comes from deliberately emphasizing the novel at the expense of the familiar. It takes a true scholar, and a superior character, to refrain from parading his originality, from making an essay in a volume of this sort the occasion for yet another exercise in revisionist history. By comparison with much of the work emanating from France (and increasingly, these days, from the United States), this volume may serve as yet another evidence of the English national character at its best. It may also serve to call attention to a subject that has unfortunately fallen into disrepute in recent years: the ideas of national character and nationality.

Collecting art

Joseph Alsop The Rare Art Traditions: A History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena. Harper and Row/ Princeton University Press, 691 pages, $59.95

reviewed by Denys Sutton

The present extraordinary expansion of the history of art has meant that greater interest is being taken in aspects of the subject that were previously only rarely explored. The decided taste for a sociology tinged with Marxism, no less typical of our time, has spread to writing about art. Inquiries concerning patronage and the nature of taste are now properly considered valuable in assessing the arts at any given period. Of course, the investigation or elucidation of such matters in the end counts for little in the evaluation of a work of art *per se*.

One fillip in the study of the vagaries of taste has been the numerous revaluations of past periods that have occurred during the last quarter of a century. Mannerist and Baroque art, the Victorian narrative painters, the Pre-Raphaelites, the once famed Barbizon School and the Symbolists have returned to favor in varying degrees. This is due to a combination of factors: genuine admiration for their artistic values, commercial acumen and enterprise, and, not least, the desire of successive generations of students to make their names with the study of something new.

One of the major growth industries has been that in nineteenth-century American painting. In *The Rare Art Traditions,* Joseph Alsop draws attention to the recent meteoric rise in value of the paintings of Frederick Edwin Church and the Hudson River School and to the decline in popularity of the once celebrated Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican. His book appears at a time when the curiosity about art collecting is intense, and understandably so, for many collectors are entertaining and eccentric personalities and the subject itself has many interesting facets.

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Mr. Alsop freely acknowledges the help of a large team of assistants; indeed, it would be almost impossible to cover so many topics without help. But the book's opinions are all his own. That he long served as a newspaperman—he was a valued political commentator for *The New York Herald Tribune* and many other journals—has given him a ready pen: he clearly has a gift for synthesis and knows a good story when he sees one.

Mr. Alsop's book is ambitious and very long; it might have been sharpened by cutting. He has been somewhat hampered, too, by his method: he combines the proposition of general ideas with narrative history (the latter is more stimulating). He is out to state a case: that there are six "rare art traditions"—that of the Greeks, of the Romans, of the Chinese, of the Japanese, of the Islamic peoples, and of the West since the Middle Ages. The by-products that result constitute the "integral integrated cultural-behavioral system" that forms the principal subject of his investigation.

In Mr. Alsop's opinion these by-products are art collecting, art history, the art market, art museums, art faking, revaluation, antiques, and high prices. The high prices, he rightly says, "always [announce] the last and most luxuriant phase of development of the by-products of art."

Few will quarrel with these categories. Yet, strangely, a significant category is absent—that of art criticism. Of course, art historians have also been critics (and vice versa), yet the art critic is far more important in influencing opinion than the scholar or the museum official.

Art criticism went hand in hand with the rise of the daily and periodical press: it had several notable and often sharp-penned practioners in eighteenth-century France and in England, one of whom was Sir Henry Bate Dudley, known as the "fighting Parson." He wrote about his friend Gainsborough in the *Morning Post* and the *Morning Herald*. His critiques, especially that of *The Mall* (now in the Frick Collection), remain compelling. Mr. Alsop might have spared a word for the strong American contingent of critics—for example, Henry Macbride, Walter Pach, F.J. Mather, and J.G. Huneker, to mention only some stalwarts from the past.

In any event, the subject of art criticism deserves to be treated afresh, especially in the context of Mr. Alsop's theories. Art criticism provides an idea of the way in which pictures, or other works of art, were interpreted in earlier periods. When this interpretation concerns contemporary art, the result can often be both amusing and instructive. Do we look at Gainsborough nowadays in the same way as Bate Dudley did? Do we look at Juan Gris through the eyes of D.H. Kahnweiler? Kahnweiler, of course, was an art dealer who occasionally put pen to paper. Mr. Alsop might have explored the influence that the dealer can exert on a painter. There is nothing discreditable about this: the art dealer can play a role comparable to that of an editor. Such seems to have been the case with the New York art dealer Daniel Charles and the artist Karl Knaths, as is suggested by a letter of 1929 from Duncan Phillips to the painter.

Joseph Alsop is at home in many civilizations. He is interesting about the development of collecting in the ancient world. Here, as elsewhere, he has done pioneering work, although he might have referred to the late Donald Strong's 1972 inaugural lecture at the University of London, "The Romans and Archeology." Mr. Alsop is amusing about a certain Damasippus, a Greek who peddled Old Masters to Roman multimillionaires in the first century B.C. He sold three figures of bacchantes to Cicero through Fabius Gallus. The famous statesman wanted to exchange them for Muses and have the price refunded. The Greek dealer was so well known in Rome that Horace even introduced him into a satire.

Mr. Alsop's discussion of the disappearance of the tradition of collecting and its reappearance in the Middle Ages is valuable. The only known true collector (as opposed to patron) seems to have been Henri of Blois, Bishop of Winchester. The sources state that he secured *veteras statuas*; he also

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acquired *champlevé* enamels (one with his portrait is in the British Museum). Mr. Alsop also discusses the role of Jean Duc de Berry, who was called to memory by the notable exhibition of Gothic art held in Paris in 1981. He collected classical cameos and showed decided individuality in choosing artists to illuminate manuscripts.

In many ways, the core of Joseph Alsop's volume consists of the sixty or so pages devoted to collecting in Renaissance Italy, in particular to the achievements of Lorenzo and Cosimo de' Medici. This subject has attracted attention ever since Jacob Burckhardt devoted his essay "Die Sammler" to it in his *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte von Italien* (1898). Since then Wackernagel, E. H. Gombrich, and Marilyn Perry, among others, have made significant contributions to the subject; many such writings are listed in the bibliography (which could have benefited from pruning). Mr. Alsop's skillful use of documents and his insights into motives bring rewards; Niccolò Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini, and others come alive in his pages. His reading of the role of Lorenzo di Cosimo, a considerable role in his view, is contrary to that of Professor Gombrich (who nevertheless recently acknowledged the value of Mr. Alsop's researches in *The New York Review of Books*). Both Professor Gombrich and Mr. Alsop point to what the latter terms the "big surprise": the considerable difference between the low price of a then contemporary painting and the high price for a classical engraved gem. By the eighteenth century the situation had changed: important Old Masters could often be picked up at auction for less than what was paid for modern works. By and large the situation hasn't changed since then, famous masterpieces being the exception.

That American writers about art are often responsive to Far Eastern art is hardly surprising in view of the extensive range of Oriental treasures found in museums in the United States. Mr. Alsop is no exception; in addition, he spent some years in China. He writes fully about collecting in China but is

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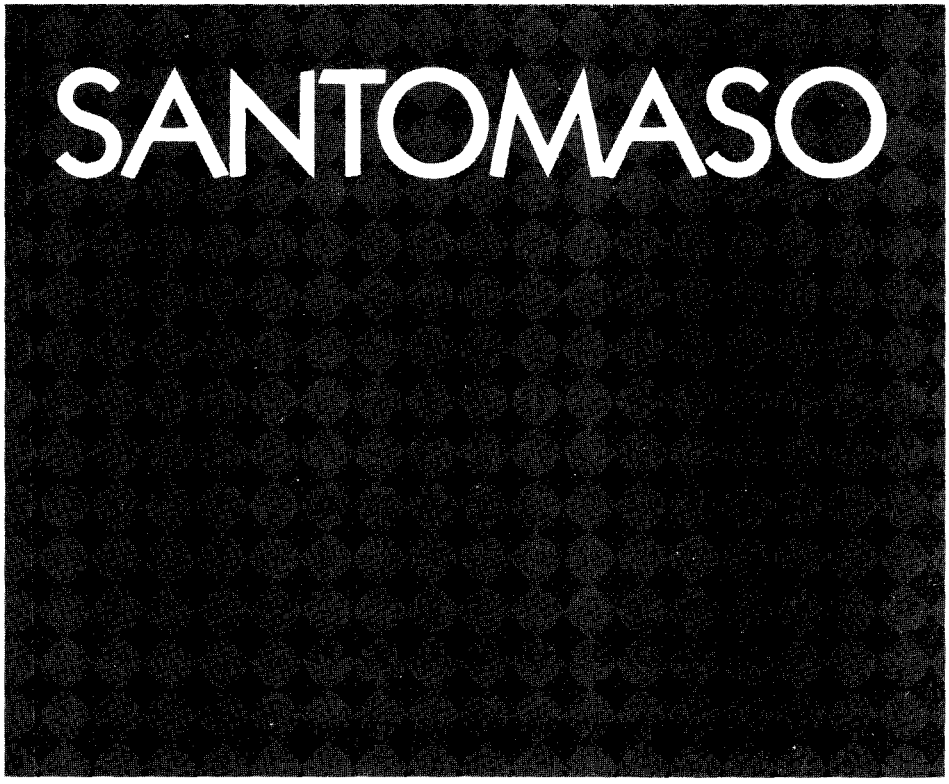

rather less informative about the situation in Japan.

He provides a clear account of the way in which in China calligraphy and painting were the province of the "scholar officials" of the ruling class, "in a way and to a degree which have no complete parallels beyond China's borders." Only an expert on Chinese art can judge the originality of Mr. Alsop's findings; he clearly establishes that "the works of famous calligraphers and painters were the sole collector's prizes for close to a thousand years." His analysis of the "snobbery problem" in China is acute; he emphasizes that before the late nineteenth century writing about art in China was more extensive than in the West.

Mr. Alsop maintains that Ernest Fenollosa was the first to open the eyes of the West to "the real greatness of Chinese and Japanese painting." Fenollosa undoubtedly exerted considerable influence in the United States but his volume on Chinese and Japanese painting only appeared posthumously in 1912; thus it followed Laurence Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* (1908), which won wide acclaim. The story of the growth of the taste for Oriental art in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially for early bronzes and sculpture, is complex and still demands investigation. A major contribution to the subject was made by Basil Gray in his lecture "The Development of Taste in Chinese Art in the West 1872 to 1972," which was published in 1974.

In the final part of his book Mr. Alsop sketches the formation of the famous collections of Charles I, which were later largely dispersed, and of the Earl of Arundel. The Earl's important role as a collector of drawings is insufficiently emphasized, however. Nor does Mr. Alsop make enough of artists as collectors, although he does refer to the classical pieces owned by Donatello.

Mr. Alsop reminds us that already in the seventeenth century Madame de Sévigné's letters reveal that works of art were considered investments: the considerable turnover in works of art during this period—an inflationary one by the way—substantiates

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the point. The use of works of art as a haven or refuge for capital in troubled times hardly requires emphasis: many a family fleeing the Communists or the Nazis had reason to be grateful that they took works of art with them.

Obviously some of Mr. Alsop's views are contentious, but he must be congratulated on having written an informative volume and having made a valuable contribution to the subject. He must be praised for another reason. His successful conclusion to an enterprise that has engaged him for some eighteen years shows that it is still feasible for a private scholar to produce a readable and erudite book on a highly specialized subject.

Act one

Alfred Kazin On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature. Fortieth Anniversary Edition. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 541 pages, $9.95

reviewed by Kenneth S. Lynn

In the thirty years following Van Wyck Brooks's blazing of the trail in *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908), the idea that American literature was worth the sustained attention of serious readers was carried forward in such exciting works as H. L. Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces,* D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature,* and Lewis Mumford's *The Golden Day,* as well as in the books that solidified Brooks's critical leadership, *America's Coming-of-Age* and *The Ordeal of Mark Twain.* By far the most ambitious, though, of all the contributions to the noble cause of rediscovering American literature was V. L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought.* As Parrington projected it, *Main Currents* would tell the whole story of our literary development, from the Puritans to the present, in three massive volumes. Moreover, he proposed to place his examination of literary texts in a historical context of political, social, and economic ideas and events. For Parrington was a Progressive intellectual whose mind had been shaped by the socially conscious presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. That American literature mirrored a continuing struggle between the business community and the rest of society was his primary article of faith. Beginning his enormous labor in 1913, Parrington brought out two volumes of the trilogy in 1927. Two years later, he suddenly died, leaving the final volume, "The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America," approximately half finished.

One of the ways in which Alfred Kazin's newly published *On Native Grounds* was perceived by readers upon its appearance in 1942 was that here was the completed third volume of *Main Currents*; here was the rest of the story that Parrington had not lived to tell. For Kazin's study of American prose writing from 1890 to 1940 could easily have been subtitled "The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America." Moreover, as a politically radical child of the Great Depression, Kazin fully shared his Progressive predecessor's belief that realism in American literature ought to be presented as the expression of modern life in America.

On Native Grounds was also perceived as the third volume in another sort of series, a series in which the three most significant periods in the history of the American imagination—Puritan New England between 1630 and 1730, the flowering in the 1850s that brought forth *Representative Men, The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, Walden,* and *Leaves of Grass,* and the two decades between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II—were successively assessed in a trio of brilliant books. In 1939, Perry Miller brought out *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century.* In 1941, F. O. Matthiessen came out with *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman.* A year later, *On Native Grounds* concentrated on the Twenties and the Thirties. Published in the chronological order of their subject matter, these books seemed to compose a unified story, and their

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collective intellectual dazzle lit up the sky for almost every student of American literature who came of age in the 1940s and early 1950s.

V. L. Parrington, Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen—in some respects, Kazin was not unworthy of the exalted company in which he had been placed. A remarkable sensitivity to literature was intermittently evident throughout *On Native Grounds*. Kazin's essay on Edith Wharton, for instance, was superb. His extraordinarily deft summations of Yvor Winters and R. P. Blackmur came close to being the last word on these literary critics. And there was a fluency in Kazin's style that made his book read like the wind.

In 1983, however, *On Native Grounds* neither enjoys the sort of historical interest that attaches to Parrington's work nor exercises the enduring analytical influence of Miller's and Matthiessen's. Although a fortieth anniversary edition of *On Native Grounds* was recently issued, the event has singularly failed to renew the book's reputation. Instead, it has merely served to raise the question of how and why a gifted author went wrong.

Like many literary radicals of the Depression era, the young Alfred Kazin professed to despise the success ethic of American capitalism. Yet apparently he was as eager as any Alger hero to make it big and make it fast. Wherefore he set out at the tender age of twenty-three to write a book that would not only encompass half a century of American writing but systematically relate it to American life.

Unfortunately, Kazin knew very little about American life, beyond the limits of his own native grounds in New York City. But because he researched and wrote the book in a mere four years, he was unable to take the time to become better acquainted with the United States, either through direct experience or through systematic readings in history, politics, religion, and geography. Impatience, it would seem, plus the *a priori* assumptions of an ideologue, also tempted

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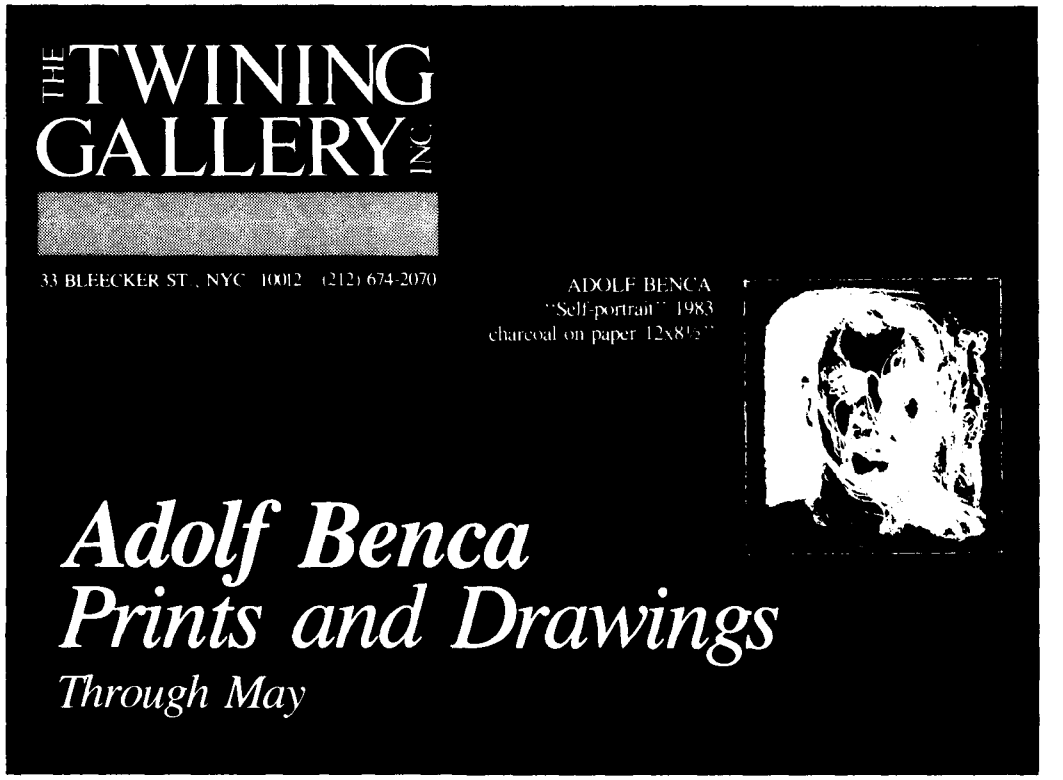
him into taking inadequately careful notes, during his "long days and evenings of reading at the New York Public Library on 42nd Street," on the literary works he intended to discuss, or on the biographical accounts of their authors' careers. As a result, *On Native Grounds* would prove to contain as many factual and interpretive errors about American literature as it did about American life.

Consider Kazin's treatment of Hemingway. "The background of his first stories, *In Our Time,* was the last frontier of his Michigan boyhood, a mountainous region of forests and lakes." Mountainous? The area through which Hemingway hiked as a boy, from Traverse City to Walloon Lake (where the Hemingway family's summer cottage was located) to Petoskey and beyond, has an average elevation of a thousand feet above sea level. In addition to being ignorant of northern Michigan's topography, the author of *On Native Grounds* was impervious to its charms, even when re-created in prose of the highest distinction. Nothing more damningly defines the critic's restricted interest in the country of his birth than his total lack of reaction to Hemingway's evocations of American nature in such stories as "Big Two-Hearted River."

Having misrepresented and shortchanged northern Michigan, Kazin went on to assert that "After completing a round of private schools . . . [Hemingway] had driven an ambulance on the Italian front before America entered the war." The facts are otherwise. Hemingway was a product of the public-school system in Oak Park, Illinois, and he did not drive an ambulance in Italy until after the United States had been involved in World War I for more than a year. Further errors include the assertion that *In Our Time* was published when Hemingway was twenty-seven (he was actually twenty-six) and that *Death in the Afternoon* appeared in 1938 (it appeared in 1932).

An even heavier concentration of mistakes occurs in Kazin's textual analysis of *In Our Time.* The theme of the book, we are told, is that living in America resembles the ugly fighting in World War I. This theme, the



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critic continues, is "sounded in the rape of Liz Coates by the hired man." Alas, the story in which Liz Coates figures, called "Up in Michigan," does not appear in *In Our Time*. Furthermore, Liz Coates's sex partner is a blacksmith, not a hired man. And the blacksmith seduces Liz, he does not rape her. In addition to being influenced by an ideological desire to discredit the quality of life under capitalism, Kazin must have been depending on a cursory reading of the story when he asserted that what happens to Liz Coates is a crime:

> One of Jim's hands went inside her dress and stroked over her breast and the other hand was in her lap. She was very frightened and didn't know how he was going to go about things but she snuggled close to him. Then the hand that felt so big in her lap went away and was on her leg and started to move up it.
>
> "Don't, Jim," Liz said. Jim slid the hand further up.
>
> "You mustn't, Jim. You mustn't." Neither Jim nor Jim's big hand paid any attention to her.
>
> The boards were hard. Jim had her dress up and was trying to do something to her. She was frightened but she wanted it. She had to have it but it frightened her.
>
> "You mustn't do it, Jim. You mustn't."
>
> "I got to. I'm going to. You know we got to."
>
> "No we haven't, Jim. We ain't got to. Oh, it isn't right. Oh, it's so big and it hurts so. You can't. Oh, Jim. Jim. Oh."

Does Kazin do any better in analyzing *In Our Time*'s depiction of World War I? No, he does not. The war is presented to us, Kazin says, in "a series of incongruities," which he proceeds to detail. In one vignette, we encounter a group of soldiers who are comically drunk; in another, we see "a huddle of refugees in the mud, the empty and perpetual flow of rain, a woman bearing her child on the road"; in yet another, we listen to what Kazin insists is a deceptively callous account of the shooting of some Germans:

> We were in a garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.

The vignette involving the drunken soldiers is correctly described. The refugees in the mud, the perpetual rain, and the woman bearing her child on the road, however, are not meant to recall World War I, but rather the war in the early Twenties between Greece and Turkey, as various references to the Maritsa River, the Karagatch road, and the "minarets stuck up in the rain out of Adrianople" make clear. By failing to pay attention to these references, Kazin missed the chance to make the important point that there were some wars that Hemingway cared about very much, others about which he had mixed feelings, and still others that revolted him, the Spanish Civil War being an example of the first kind, World War I an example of the second, and the Greco-Turkish War an example of the third. In Kazin's view, apparently, a war was a war was a war. The same lack of discrimination marks his reading of the vignette about the shooting of the Germans. The narrator, we are assured, is concealing feelings of "horror" behind a mask of callousness. Even if Kazin did not know that Hemingway was paying tribute in this episode to the cool professionalism and the offhand manner of speaking of a real officer in the British army named Chink Dorman-Smith, who had been decorated for the fighting he had done in Belgium and who in the aftermath of the war had become one of Hemingway's closest friends, any critic worth his salt should have been able to catch the narrator's Kiplingesque tone of voice. There are other vignettes in *In Our Time* that express a horror of war, but the story of how the Germans were "potted" as they came over the wall is not one of them.

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The conclusion that Hemingway was a member of a "lost generation" flowed easily from Kazin's reductionistic reading of *In Our Time*. It did not matter to the author of *On Native Grounds* that Hemingway had long since disclaimed the notion that his generation was lost; his quotation of Gertrude Stein on that subject in one of the epigraphs to *The Sun Also Rises,* said Hemingway, had been intended ironically. Kazin, however, preferred to ignore this testimony and accept Malcolm Cowley's. Cowley had advanced the lost-generation interpretation in *Exile's Return* in 1934, the very year in which the precociously literate Kazin, aged nineteen, began to write book reviews, at Cowley's invitation, for *The New Republic.* The interpretation was perfectly suited to Cowley's quasi-Communist point of view. On the one hand, it permitted him to portray the sensitive young men who drove ambulances in World War I as the permanently traumatized victims of that experience and to salute their expatriatism in the Twenties as a justifiable flight from the philistinism of the Harding era; on the other hand, the "lost" label made it possible for him to look down on those writers who had not yet made the same commitment to left-wing politics that he had. Even though Kazin did not like Cowley as a person, he was so enraptured by *Exile's Return* that in a key chapter of his own book called "Into the Thirties: All the Lost Generations" he seems to have simply rewritten the Cowley line in more operatic language. They were "sad young men," those writers of the Twenties; they were "the beautiful and the [*sic*] damned." It was "the war, of course," Kazin continued, that had made them that way, "even . . . a writer like Scott Fitzgerald, who had not been abroad to the war at all . . . ." Confronted with that biographical fact, a less ideological critic would have at once started to look for some other factor besides the war as an explanation of the damnation of Scott Fitzgerald. To Kazin, though, the war-victim explanation in *Exile's Return* needed no modification.

The author of *On Native Grounds* also responded sympathetically to the views of American social and economic development that could be found in the Thirties in leftist magazines. Thus in his first chapter, "The Opening Struggle for Realism," Kazin recapitulated with all the crudity of a Robert Minor cartoon for the *New Masses* the terrible story of how the citizens of late nineteenth-century America were "stricken by industrial capitalism and frightened by it." This new economic tyranny had emerged from the Civil War, "stamping across a hundred thousand corpses, blaring its tariffs, sniggering its corruption, crying 'Nothing is lost but honor.'" Even European financiers, Kazin asserted, were "shocked by the intensity of [American capitalism's] lust." That the intensely non-philanthropic financiers of Europe were also amazed at the philanthropy of their American counterparts—in the twenty years after 1878, for example, American industrialists gave at least $140,000,000 to all branches of higher education in the United States—is not mentioned by Kazin. Nor does he acknowledge the cultural transformation of Chicago, where the Art Institute, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Field Columbian Museum, the Crerar and Newberry Libraries and the University of Chicago were among the many splendid institutions that were funded in the closing years of the nineteenth century by the fortunes of business leaders. "Orgiastic in their greed," says Kazin, the titans of American industry "produced nothing of 'culture.'" As for Chicago, the city "radiated an atmosphere of pure greed."

Given such "corruption and selfishness," was it any wonder, Kazin asks, that American writers felt a "terrible estrangement" from their country, or that an "enmity to the established order" became the "tradition" of American writing? William Dean Howells's conversion to socialism was a case in point. The novelist was so appalled by the breakdown of social harmony in the 1880s and early 1890s that he gave up writing novels like *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in favor of a

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grimmer brand of realism. In books like *A Hazard of New Fortunes,* he "introduced German Marxists and Tolstoyan Communists, speculative intellectuals and hungry radicals who argued out the imperfections of the human race amidst the clamor of New York elevated trains. And with them appeared oil millionaires and hard-fisted village entrepreneurs, working-men on strike and scabs, unscrupulous journalists, and . . . speculators and defaulters and the vulgar new rich."

Yet if Kazin was quite persuasive in linking the emergence of Howells's social fiction to larger events in American life, his explanation for Howells's sudden abandonment of that kind of fiction was oddly vague. By the turn of the century, says Kazin, middle-class Americans had become "complacent" as a result of the nation's "imperialist" triumph in the Spanish-American War, and Howells simply "went with them." In other words, Howells lacked the will to keep up the good fight, and "his ingrained prudishness came to the fore again." That Howells stopped writing social fiction because a surging prosperity at the end of the Nineties had substantially alleviated the suffering and the unrest that had been troubling him was a proposition that Kazin was not prepared to consider. For the inability of capitalism to create social justice was one of his principal pieties, and he did not hesitate to use linguistic tricks—a couple of which are worth illustrating with italics—to reduce the turn-of-the-century turnabout in the economy to a sham and a delusion. "The swelling tide of wealth in the country *seemed* to usher in a *brief* period of peace and plenty."

Kazin is even less forthright about Dreiser than he is about Howells, arguing in the teeth of overwhelming evidence to the contrary that pleasure boats, big houses, and other appurtenances of success were "something Dreiser could neither approve nor disapprove." Kazin likewise sidesteps the early Dreiser's expressed contempt for social reformers. Kazin's strong identification with Dreiser's portrayals of the urban immigrant experience seemed to make it difficult for him to acknowledge that many of the novelist's views of life were opposed to his own.

The critic who all too easily identified with Dreiser's novels was all too easily repulsed by Faulkner's. This writer is "a Southern gentleman," Kazin remarked with obvious distaste, as he launched into the most remarkable piece of critical vilification in his book. Faulkner's use of literary forms is "at once irritably contemptuous and frantically bold." He is a writer who is so "regional" that he is "almost parochial." He has "essentially a boyish mind." The "antics and institutions" of the South excite in him "a lazily humorous disgust" that is "often indistinguishable from cynical acquiescence." His work does not spring "from a conscious and procreative criticism of society or conduct or tradition." The great "problem" of his writing is "its lack of a center." In sum, Faulkner's "corn-fed, tobacco-drooling phantoms are not the constituents of a representative American epic, protagonists in a great modern tragedy."

Nowhere in this wholesale onslaught is there the slightest recognition of the various ways in which Faulkner's heritage of southern Protestantism provides a "center" for his art, nor is any appreciation voiced of Faulkner's marvelous responsiveness to the woods and fields of Mississippi. Only a lethal combination of ideological prejudgment and intellectual and imaginative deficiency could have produced the kind of verdict that Kazin renders against the premier novelist of twentieth-century America.

In Kazin's final chapter, "America! America!" written in the shadow of Hitler's early victories in World War II, the author demonstrates not only that he has at long last read a good deal of historical and descriptive literature about the United States but that he has found much of it quite compelling. Unfortunately, Kazin was not prompted to revise his entire manuscript in the light of these belated discoveries. (Kazin has likewise not troubled to make any changes in the text of the fortieth anniversary edition of

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his book.) As a result, *On Native Grounds* has a broken back, ideologically speaking. Most of it is anti-American, but its concluding chapter is patriotic. As Kazin himself says in the new preface to the fortieth anniversary edition, "Before I came to the end of my book in 1942, the moral bankruptcy of many left-wing writers left me, though still radical, less convinced of the 'necessary' connection between literature and social criticism. My fierce attachment to the American scene itself, evident in my last chapter, was no doubt written as a protest against ideology. The hope of justice in human affairs had become less important to me, less probable, than undeviating freedom."

But with the triumph of freedom in 1945, Kazin's "fierce attachment" faded quickly, and the hatred of the American scene that is so evident in so many of the pages of *On Native Grounds* came flooding back. Indeed, as the years passed, his estrangement from his country reached the point where he began to take pleasure in contemplating the possibility of the nation's doom. In a review, for instance, of John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich,* he seized on a description of a filling station's shrouded gas pumps not as an illustration of how easily apocalyptic feelings could be induced in the mind of a permanently immature novelist, but as the portentous symbol of an expiring civilization. This is the novel we deserve! cried Kazin, and there was exultation in his voice.

Even though the pervasive anti-Americanism of contemporary American writing is ideologically pleasing to him, one would think that Kazin would still be capable of judging its manifest shortcomings as literature. The sad fact is, though, that he has lost this capability, and with it his critical authority. Thus, the enormous intellectual promise he displayed in certain chapters of *On Native Grounds* has been short-circuited. "No one can yet tell us all that F. Scott Fitzgerald meant when he said that 'there are no second acts in American lives,' or why we have been so oppressed by the sense of time, or why our triumphs have been so brittle." When he wrote those searing words in the preface to the first edition of *On Native Grounds,* the twenty-seven-year-old Kazin was unwittingly composing the epitaph for his own career.

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Notebook

PBS flogs the arts

by Samuel Lipman

A disturbing trend is increasingly evident in the presentation of the arts on public television. There is, to start with, a concentration on blockbuster productions and series, ranging from histories of art (often indistinguishable from sumptuously produced travelogues) to imported stagings of Shakespeare. In music this approach has meant relying for the most part on the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, the two still viable music performing components of Lincoln Center; it has also meant highlighting star turns by famous singers and instrumentalists performing a repertory notable for high tune content, if for little else.

If this were all that were going on, matters would be dreary enough, especially considering the hopes once entertained for the elevation of taste through public broadcasting. But there is more, and worse. The Public Broadcasting Service has discovered that there is gold in the arts. Now that PBS is seen to be in a financial crisis—caused by escalating costs and declining government support—the watchword is *fundraising*. For this, the arts provide a medium both glamorous and persuasive.

In the visual arts, the emphasis here is on auctions, in which second-rate art goes to the highest bidder. With the possible exception of the buyer, everybody benefits in this process; the local station takes in donations while the donor of the art—often a commercial gallery—receives copious mention, credit, and tax deductions. But all this is relatively small-time, because the art involved is so run-of-the-mill and the general atmosphere so determinedly loving hands and local. It is otherwise, however, with the musical fundraising promotions. These involve celebrity talent displayed in an atmosphere alternating between pretentious high-mindedness and the hard sell of a cerebral-palsy telethon.

Just how music is currently being used to raise money was demonstrated by the "Gala of Stars" broadcast in March to climax PBS's latest campaign for memberships and donations from the viewing audience. The three-hour show had been taped in March at the New York State Theater in Lincoln Center. There were two masters of ceremonies for the program: Schuyler Chapin, formerly general manager of the Metropolitan Opera and now Dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, was the suitably refined wrap-around host, serving in the higher cause of public television; Beverly Sills warmed up the audience in the hall, with her special combination of opera-star glamour and folksiness. New York-area viewers were offered, as well, extended glimpses of the WNET boiler room, its banks of telephones presided over by some of the most determined-looking grandmother types available from Central Casting. The ringmasters for these fundraising volunteers were two of the station's announcers, young women who together managed to convey an

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impression of show-business insouciance combined with fear of the malign consequences for the life of the mind if the fund-raising goal was not fully met. It wasn't, by the way, and both the life of the mind and PBS, seemingly unchanged, are still with us.

Although the appeals for money seemed to go on non-stop, there indeed was a good deal of music on the PBS "Gala." James Levine, identified incessantly as "Maestro James Levine, Music Director of the Metropolitan Opera," conducted the American Symphony Orchestra. It must be said that this busy conductor's ability to direct a wide range of music from memory, as he did during the "Gala," testifies to an impressive musical facility. Unfortunately, as so often happens at his Metropolitan Opera performances, that facility is uncomplemented by a feeling for style, for structural coherence, or for musical detail. The American Symphony Orchestra, perhaps the only self-governing full-sized orchestra in this country, also confirmed an unhappy judgment on its artistic accomplishment: self-government, no matter how laudable in other venues, does not produce reliable intonation, rhythmic precision, and easy responsiveness.

The musical evening began with a troubled and rushed performance of Mozart's Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*. Next, two highly regarded members of George Balanchine's New York City Ballet, Suzanne Farrell and Sean Lavery, danced a work choreographed by Balanchine to the music of Gluck. Their performance lacked the polish and discipline one might have expected. The next event, the last before the "Act I" intermission, featured American pianist Garrick Ohlsson playing the last movement of Tchaikovsky's famous First Piano Concerto. This movement inevitably sounds tawdry in isolation from the first two movements of the work. Mr. Ohlsson's performance, helped along not a bit by Mr. Levine's workaday rigidity, was marked by a kind of reserve and lack of involvement better suited to washing out someone else's laundry.

The intermission featured a kaleidoscope

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of images of backstage and rehearsal activity, along with a montage of artists bowing to the audience at the 1981 "Gala." The music returned with Elisabeth's great display aria from the opening of Act II of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. As sung—or rather, shouted—by the American soprano Grace Bumbry, dressed in a wildly inappropriate orange gown with orange feathers at the sleeves, the aria made a convincing argument for Tannhäuser's tendency to prefer the seductive Venus to the chaste Elisabeth. The *Là ci darem la mano* duet from *Don Giovanni,* performed by Mirella Freni and Nicolai Ghiaurov, at least had the advantage of their authentic, if not quite first-rate, vocalism. Much the same could be said of the aria from *Macbeth* sung by tenor Carlo Bergonzi. When Sherrill Milnes sang (and acted out) Iago's *Credo* from *Otello,* the penalty that richly talented singers pay today for their stardom was abundantly clear. At the outset, Miss Sills told the audience that Mr. Milnes's appearance at the "Gala" was lucky, since he had only the previous night been singing *Henry VIII* (by Saint-Saëns) in San Diego. Not surprisingly, considering the rigors of his schedule, Mr. Milnes's voice was uncharacteristically thin and wan.

Next followed what turned out to be the musical highlight of the evening. An extended excerpt from Act III of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* featured three lesser-known American singers, James Morris, Catherine Malfitano, and Jean Kraft. (Their names were not mentioned in John O'Connor's dutiful review of the event in *The New York Times.*) Here was impressive work: conviction, drive, creative absorption. Even Mr. Levine seemed fully involved in the music. Interestingly, Offenbach's music—the cream of light French music near the end of the nineteenth century—proved to be perfect for television and for its purpose here: the transmission of high culture to an American mass audience.

After another long intermission, filled with fundraising pep talks and exhortations, the stage performances resumed with an excerpt from George Balanchine's setting of English music-hall tunes, *Union Jack,* performed by Patricia McBride and Bart Cook. Lynn Harrell then played the opening movement of the Dvorák Cello Concerto. Following the lighthearted dancing, this long immersion in Romantic sentiment felt strange indeed. It seemed mocked and trivialized by what had gone before.

After time out for yet another noncommercial commercial break, Carlo Bergonzi returned to sing a popular Italian folk song, introduced by the following pointless words of Miss Sills:

> I know that most people think that any time they hear an Italian song it's a Neapolitan song. Well, it's not. But tonight you're going to hear a real Neapolitan song.

Real or unreal, Italian or Neapolitan, the song (Mr. Levine played the piano accompaniment) lacked in performance the essential atmosphere of garlic and tomato sauce, and Mr. Bergonzi's concluding high note failed utterly. Grace Bumbry then sang "Bless This House" and Nicolai Ghiaurov "The Drunkard Song," a Russian creation. All three efforts demonstrated just how much personality is needed to perform nonclassical music effectively, and how painfully trite such music can be without it.

The climax of the evening for the audience came next, in the "person" of Miss Piggy, the puppet prima donna so familiar to afficionados of *The Muppet Show*. In the *Times,* Mr. O'Connor referred to her appearance this way:

> . . . very nearly stealing the show, Miss Piggy shows up to do one of her inimitable routines with Miss Sills and the conductor James Levine, both of whom are gracious and understandably amused.

Considering that Miss Piggy's routine included her attempting to show how a pig would behave if she became an opera singer and her characterizing the conductor as "big-mouth Levine," the artists' graciousness and capacity for easy amusement seem

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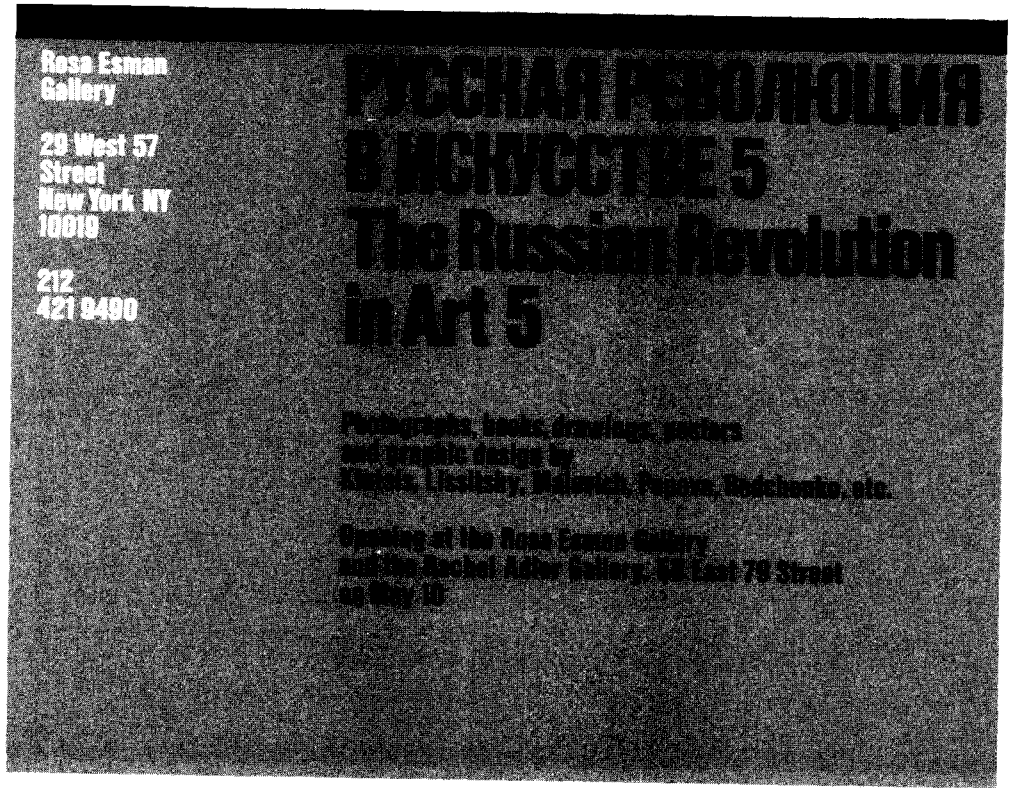
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remarkable indeed. Following Miss Piggy were the pop singer Cleo Laine and her husband, saxophonist John Dankworth. (The transition was managed by Miss Laine's singing the Bessie Smith song "Gimme a Pig-foot and a Bottle of Beer.") Miss Laine's cabaret singing is doubtless enticing, but there was something incongruous about her being accompanied by no less than the music director of the Metropolitan Opera. Such an incongruity will doubtless be applauded by those levelers of art who speak in the name of "the people," but for others such an attempt at mixing milieux can only be seen as a bad job done by all.

After one more hype-filled intermission (featuring Miss Piggy herself), Mirella Freni returned, this time with an excerpt from *Don Carlo*. Then a "surprise" occurred, one that must have been rehearsed with the orchestra the morning of the taping: as if by magic, Placido Domingo materialized just as Miss Sills was apologizing for his not being able to perform at the "Gala" due to his commitments across the plaza at Lincoln Center. Fully costumed, he proceeded to sing the aria—from *Adriana Lecouvreur*—he had just finished a few hundred feet away at the Metropolitan Opera house. His performance only renewed one's fears that, having attempted to emulate Luciano Pavarotti in becoming a pop vocal hero, he will soon follow Pavarotti in losing that vocal finish which distinguishes a big voice from a tight shout.

The musical extravaganza ended with a portion of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, taken from the current New York City Opera production. It seemed attractive enough on television, though hardly in the league of *Tales of Hoffmann*. Perhaps the tawdriness of the setting swamped the art itself. Certainly this has happened with many of PBS's musical offerings, on this and other occasions.

It need hardly be said that this particular PBS offering was not the first such extravaganza in the history of musical show business. It is not because their artistic level was

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so disappointing, however, that the performances on this particular program deserve serious attention. It is rather because the artistic content of public television is exemplified in this "Gala." Moreover, that content is offered to us as a justification for support of the entire enterprise, which, as even its staunchest supporters will readily acknowledge, consists of a great many programs that have little or nothing to do with the arts. The arts are certainly the moral foundation for the many, many appeals and exhortations that define the purpose and set the tone for an event like the "Gala."

The tasteless and offensive words that accompanied the artistic performances provided a further key to the present state of the arts on PBS. They expressed a sovereign contempt for the audience whose dollars and good will were being so avidly solicited and a contempt too for the very idea of art itself.

Schuyler Chapin began the festivities on a false note by talking of an "equal" partnership between the people who present these programs and the audience that pays for them:

> I'm Schuyler Chapin. Just moments from now you will witness this grand house of the New York State Theater filled with the appreciative audience of this year's Gala of Stars, but more importantly these seats represent just a fraction of the Gala viewers across the country. So let me ask you to take your seat, with pride. After all, tonight's Gala is the essential partnership of the arts with you. [*He points at the camera.*]

Stripped of the fashionable rhetoric, a rather clearer idea of what this partnership consists of emerged from a later piece of hectoring, spoken by the more impassioned of the two local announcers:

> Mid-Fairfield friends of Thirteen [Channel 13] donated $2,500 to the cause, and that's the kind of partnership we really need.

In short: Yours to pay, ours to reason why.

Another constant theme of the evening was the idea that art was something for everyone, and that works of art were everyday adornments to life. Beverly Sills spoke about the success of public television in bringing opera to the masses:

> Samuel Johnson once wrote a dictionary, and he defined opera as that "exotic and irrational entertainment." Well, thanks to PBS, we ain't exotic no more. Mad scenes may be in but exotic is definitely out.

Here is a fashionable—although indefensible—attitude toward opera as an art form: it's all one melodious sitcom holding up a mirror to daily life. Try telling that to Aida, or to Elektra.

Miss Piggy's appearance, too, represented a theme of the "Gala." What she brought to the event was a hard-edged satire on the very idea of art (not to mention public television). No more need be quoted than Miss Piggy's testimonial to public television: "I love PBS because it shows all the things that are important to a pig." Mr. Chapin's response (in a throaty voice) seemed perfectly in character with the evening: "Couldn't have said it better, and I couldn't have said it better." Then, consummate fundraiser to the end, he kissed her. Doubtless this is humorous to some, but there is something both cheap and mean-spirited about it also—unless, of course, one thinks that pigs too are art-lovers.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the evening's commentary demonstrated how far public television has gone in its search for successful marketing methods, regardless of the effect they have in destroying the very enterprise its supporters are trying to help. There was a constant attempt—throughout the evening—to arouse feelings of guilt in non-contributing viewers. On one occasion the WNET announcer pulled out all the stops:

> What about those of you who haven't responded? What about those of you who are sitting watching that program tonight, enjoy-

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> ing it and not calling? I don't know how you can stand it. I really don't. What happens when you go to work tomorrow?. You talk about the programs you've seen this weekend, and they ask you if you are a member.

Such psychological attack—a moralistic hard sell—makes commercial television seem by comparison gentle and respectful toward its audience.

PBS is not just the victim of rising costs and declining subsidies. The self-regarding concerns of its executives and backers and their ambitions to rival the commercial networks at public expense are threatening the educational purpose that is supposed to underlie what was once naïvely thought of as educational television. If PBS now seems to be fighting for survival, the question arises whether there is anything worth preserving. The PBS "Gala of Stars" went far to suggest that there is not.

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Letters

The Rothko Case

To the Editors:

John Bernard Myers, who contributed so much to our appreciation of contemporary art in the 1950s and 1960s, adds to our further understanding of those years in the "notes" and "memories" paragraphs of his recent article, "Mark Rothko and the Rothko Case." His portraits of Rothko, Theodore Stamos, Bernard Reis, and the New York art scene are perceptive and sensitive. But, when he turns to his "observations" of the Rothko case and the role played by Kate Rothko and the Rothko Foundation, Myers allows a scrim of sentimentality to come between him and the outcome. He has gotten a fundamental fact wrong; and even when his memory is accurate, his inferences, to put it kindly, are in many instances irresponsible.

There is no need here to rehash the Rothko trial; that ground has been covered often enough. But it may be helpful in clearing up Myers's doubts if we compare the position of the Rothko Foundation and Rothko's legacy—his paintings—today with the situation that prevailed before Kate Rothko brought her 1971 suit. For Myers either to question Kate Rothko's temerity in bringing the suit or to suggest that the subsequent pain suffered by the executors and the Marlborough Gallery somehow negated the benefit to the Foundation and, I believe, the public, is to permit his friendships to mask the realities and the equities, then and now.

What was the Foundation's position then and now? Myers is factually wrong in stating that the Rothko Foundation was created to "help men over fifty years old if they are sick or in trouble." Whatever Rothko may have said to Myers, the simple fact is that neither his will nor the original charter of the Foundation makes any reference to indigent older artists. The will and the original charter are public documents which Myers or anyone else is free to examine.

Soon after Rothko's death, the Foundation board amended its charter to make specific reference to assisting older artists. But, when the new Rothko Foundation board took office in 1976, it removed this post mortem amendment and conformed the Foundation's charter once again with those purposes which Rothko himself had explicitly established. The Foundation may today assist older artists, but this is neither its sole nor principal charge.

Furthermore, had the suit not been brought, the Foundation would have been merely a conduit through which monies realized by discount-priced sales or consignment of its entire collection through the Marlborough Gallery were passed on to indigent artists. But, clearly, at least half of all future proceeds would have accrued to the gallery and not to the Foundation.

In this context, Myers appears to be favorably impressed by the fact that "the executors exacted a promise from the gallery to unload at least thirteen pictures before the end of the year for a guaranteed minimum total of $250,000." "From my professional standpoint," he adds, "I, of course, wondered how the gallery could possibly fulfill its commitment." Myers seems to have forgotten that individual Rothkos were already then

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being sold at $200,000 or more. The question Myers should really have asked is, "How could the gallery possibly fail?"

In any event, in 1971 the Foundation, although essentially the sole beneficiary of Rothko's estate, had consigned all of its pictures for sale, retaining no control over their ultimate disposition. And, as Myers himself notes: "Many of the pictures were in poor condition, and much restoration, including stretching and framing, would be required. I immediately wondered where the works would be stored and who would undertake the large job of acting as curator . . . . Overseeing seven hundred or more works struck me as a formidable and daunting effort." He was right to wonder.

If Kate had not acted, no one would have seen to the proper storage, reconditioning, and general oversight, not of seven hundred works but of some two thousand items. The best, or at least the most salable pictures, would have been sold with little effort under the consignment arrangement. The remainder would have moldered, uncared for, in a variety of warehouses, it being in no one's interest to worry about them.

When, in 1979-80, the new Foundation board took physical possession of its half of the estate, it indeed found that many pictures were in poor condition; and shocking storage conditions, mishandling, and mold damage were causing further deterioration. As its first priority the Foundation built an exemplary storage facility, engaged a registrar, curator, and restorer, and set about to rescue and preserve the works entrusted to it.

Myers also quotes Stamos as noting that "the immense task of compiling a catalogue raisonné of Rothko's work would have to wait until there were sufficient funds in the estate." Myers himself comments that the Jackson Pollock catalogue raisonné had "been going on with well-trained art historians since 1960" and "was eventually published in 1978." Alas, a Rothko catalogue raisonné would never have been begun, much less completed, had not the trial intervened. Since neither the Rothko children nor the Foundation would have retained any surviving interest in the works of art, no other individual or organization could have supplied either the motivation or the resources necessary to catalogue Rothko's work.

The new Foundation has begun work on a catalogue raisonné and expects to complete it before the end of this decade. It has the resources, the personnel, and most importantly, the motivation to undertake this formidable task. Additionally, the Foundation has funded the Archives of American Art in preparing an oral history of Rothko. And the work of condition reporting, restretching, cleaning, and outright restoration has already made significant progress.

But perhaps most important, the new board's decision to keep its collection rather than sell it, now makes it possible for scholars to study Rothko's work and for the general public to view it through carefully organized exhibitions and extended loans. And the Foundation will assist mature artists in a meaningful way by underwriting exhibitions of their work in art galleries.

Ultimately, the Foundation plans to give away its entire collection—probably before the end of this decade—to appropriate institutions here and abroad, in order to insure that Rothko's work will be accessible to the public at large. Future generations will, thus, have the opportunity to decide for themselves how important Rothko's contribution may have been. But, had the original Foundation board's policy of selling everything through a commercial gallery been realized, only a few works would have haphazardly ended up in public institutions. By contrast, the current Foundation's gifts will take the form of coherent selections of pictures from various periods, making Rothko's work available in discrete groupings, just as he himself would have wished.

For Myers misses the key insight: Rothko's fears, concerns, and even dislike of collectors, galleries, and museums had little to do with his personal relationships. Rather, his overriding concern was for the fate of his work. As Rothko said, in a famous 1947 statement:

> A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world.

Of course, Rothko was affected by his relationships, and he undoubtedly was moved by the plight of his less fortunate contemporaries. But,

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above all, he was concerned with his work and his reputation. This is why he was always reluctant to show, and this is primarily why he created the Rothko Foundation.

John Bernard Myers fails to make clear what motivated Rothko or explain where his priorities lay. But this is precisely what Kate Rothko, inexperienced as she may have been in 1970, did instinctively understand.

Kate Rothko, of course, can speak for herself. But from the point of view of the Foundation and the public which it exists to serve, the successful outcome of the Rothko trial greatly enhanced the opportunity for present and future generations to see, learn from, and even enjoy what matters most, Mark Rothko's work.

Donald M. Blinken
President
The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.
New York City

John Bernard Myers replies:

Donald Blinken, an old and helpful acquaintance, writes that I was "factually wrong in stating that the Rothko Foundation was created to 'help men over fifty years old if they are sick or in trouble,'" and he cites as "evidence" the fact that "neither his [Rothko's] will nor the original charter of the Foundation makes any reference to indigent older artists." But my article did not discuss either the terms of Rothko's will or the original charter of the Foundation. It focused on what Rothko told me about his wishes and intentions, and told others as well, and about this matter I was and remain factually correct.

The truth is, Rothko's views on this matter were very well known among his circle of friends, and Mr. Blinken must surely be aware of this. It was Mark, after all, who selected the committee that would decide on grants once his foundation was legally established with the I.R.S. Even before his death, Mark had arranged for two deserving artists to be aided when they were in need—George Constant, a painter who was an old friend of Mark's, and Gwen Davies, a painter who had been an art teacher at Dalton (the school that Kate Rothko attended) but who was then without a job. It was precisely because Rothko's wishes were so well known on this matter that, as Mr. Blinken writes, "the Foundation board amended its charter to make specific reference to assisting older artists." It is worth pointing out, I think, that the list of writers and artists aided by the Foundation between 1970 and 1972 was remarkably distinguished. Among those aided were Djuna Barnes, James T. Farrell, Jean Garrigue, Horace Gregory, Kenneth Patchen, Parker Tyler, John Ferren, Maurice Golubov, Leon Hartl, Carl Holty, Norman Lewis, Loren MacIver, and the composer Ben Weber. The task of helping older artists who found themselves in difficult circumstances was in fact carried out very conscientiously by the original Foundation board. As for the prices then commanded by Rothko's paintings, I have not forgotten that there were a few pictures that may have brought $200,000, but Mr. Blinken seems to have forgotten exactly how very few Rothko paintings there were in that price class. Most of the other "salable" paintings could only be sold at much lower figures, and as for the others—which ranged from the less salable to the unsalable—the less said the better.

It is in this perspective, in any case, that the Foundation's plans "to give away its entire collection" needs to be understood. It is nice to know that "Rothko's work will be accessible to the public at large," but it is worth pointing out, I think, that this wholesale giveaway plan will also have the effect of inflating the market value of the Rothko paintings that remain for sale. Does anyone really believe that this was Mark Rothko's intention?

I am happy to hear that work has begun on a catalogue raisonné of the Rothko oeuvre. But surely this too could have been accomplished without abandoning Rothko's plan to aid needy older artists.

As to whether Rothko intended the provisions of his will to result in some kind of shrine to his work, I remain unconvinced that this was his true intention, and perhaps Mark knew best. It may have been that he realized shrines do not in the end insure an artist's reputation or position. There have been many such shrines—for instance, those of Frederick Church, Boldini, Vasarely. Sometimes—as in the case of the Rodin Museum—they do the trick, but often they don't. When works of art are, as Valéry said, "aban-

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doned," they are on their own. Posterity decides.

Mr. Blinken thinks me "sentimental" and protective toward those who were destroyed by the Rothko case. I am happy to state that art has never seemed to me as important as life.

Dwight Macdonald

To the Editors:

As one of Dwight Macdonald's two sons, I must reluctantly rebut the tasteless and misleading obituary of my father by Hilton Kramer in your January issue. I do this reluctantly on two grounds. First, my father rather than I should reply to such a vile attack. Second, I had previously thought Mr. Kramer one of the wiser anti-Communists around, if a somewhat humorless one at times. Imagine my genuine shock, then, to read this personal attack disguised as an obituary.

Before noting a few rebuttable details, however, let me stress the old Latin maxim invoked by Dean Acheson when asked by the press to comment on the death of Sen. Joseph McCarthy: "De mortuis nihil, nisi bonum est." Similarly I must ask Mr. Kramer, why the rush to desecrate someone he apparently loathed? Why not let a decent interval pass for those who respected my father as a writer or political activist, not to mention those who loved him as well? On those familiar grounds of conduct alone, Mr. Kramer's relentless attack—for that is what it was—went beyond spite to lack of character and taste. It was unworthy of a man who purports to elevate standards in a magazine whose very title suggests the ultimate in taste itself.

Now for a few details. Mr. Kramer's basic point, if I may simplify his lengthy abuse, is that my father was a political "dandy" who put on various anarchist, pacifist, or socialist costumes to fit his passing moods over five decades. In a limited sense, this is fair enough: father was proud of his eclecticism as a free thinker on the Left, and why not? His very independence of a fixed position on the Left gave him the tactical freedom to think for himself on issues and personalities as they arose, not to hastily cram them into some Procrustean pigeon-holes. But Kramer would expand his insight on dandyism to cover father's beliefs as well, and in doing so misses an essential point about Dwight (I and my brother Nick called him that and will continue to). Dwight was always strongly committed to a few basic things like less war (quite distinct from the pacifism which Kramer would lock him into); he was always consistent about basic things like higher standards of culture or higher standards of living and employment for the dispossessed. From these basics, Dwight never strayed. It was only in arguing about their realization that he often diverged from fixed tactical positions.

Reading Kramer's incessant bombardment of my father—done at extraordinary length for such a frivolous character!—one might fail to take father seriously in any way. Was he really the fellow, for example, whose lengthy article in *The New Yorker* (a serious magazine, not the society rag Kramer implies) had brought the issue of American poverty to the fore in 1962, calling Arthur Schlesinger's attention to Michael Harrington's book—and thus poverty to the desk of a President? Was Dwight the critic whose lengthy analysis of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible or Webster's Third Edition—never mind his sideshow attack on James Gould Cozzens, which Kramer alone cites—set many thinking about the decline of English usage in America, long before the Messrs. Newman, Safire, or Simon entered that field? Or what of father's lengthy review of *A Death in the Family,* credited by some for winning the 1958 Pulitzer Prize and posthumous recognition for James Agee (whose *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* my father and mother tried selling through the "*politics* Book Club" in the 1940s—how well I recall its dreary brown spines marching unsold across the *politics* office on Astor Place).

Finally, what of Kramer's innuendos about why *The New York Times* obituary of my father may have omitted that he worked—for a year in 1956-7, not as a "regular columnist" throughout the 1950s as Kramer seems to have it—on *Encounter* magazine? Kramer thinks the *Times* omitted this since the *Encounter* link might "pose a danger to Macdonald's highly polished reputation as an exemplary radical . . ." Kramer's implication seems to be that father would have been posthumously embarrassed by mention of a magazine later found to have links to the CIA.

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Nonsense. The same "embarrassment" could afflict Irving Kristol as well, since he also served at *Encounter* back then, without knowing of the CIA link. But Kramer is so eager to uncover conspiracies, besmirch reputations, and drag about red herrings, that even this absurd muck must be dredged as well.

Michael C. D. Macdonald
New York City

Hilton Kramer replies:
I have no wish to argue here with Mr. Macdonald about the nature of his father's accomplishments. These have, in any case, been fulsomely lauded elsewhere. But I do feel obliged to correct the misleading and mistaken assertions contained in his letter.

It is simply not true, for example, that I "loathed" Dwight Macdonald. I hardly knew him. On the few occasions when we met, I found him—as many people did—to be both amiable and amusing. What I was addressing in my article, however, was his published work. My piece was not in any sense a "personal attack" on the man, but a critical analysis of his ideas, his style, and his point of view as a writer.

Nor is it accurate to describe a two-page article as having been "done at extraordinary length." Certainly by Dwight Macdonald's standards the article was very brief indeed. As for calling *The New Yorker* a "society rag," this is Mr. Macdonald's contribution to the discussion, not mine. And while it may or may not constitute "absurd muck" to introduce "the CIA link" into the discussion of *Encounter,* this too is Mr. Macdonald's doing, not mine. I mentioned Dwight Macdonald's connection with *Encounter* in the Fifties because the political position of the magazine was so distinctly at odds with the radicalism commonly associated with his writing. The fact is, there was a period in the Fifties when Dwight Macdonald not only wrote a column for *Encounter* but was actually eager to succeed Irving Kristol as the magazine's co-editor. Mr. Macdonald is too young to have known this, but neither youth nor filial piety justifies distorting the historical record. Neither do they justify name-calling.

I am pleased to learn, however, that Mr. Macdonald found my characterization of his father as a political dandy—the central point of my article, after all—to be "fair enough."

Cobbett and the Reform Act

To the Editors:
In the review of my book *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend* in *The New Criterion* for October, Gertrude Himmelfarb states that Cobbett "passionately opposed" the Reform Act of 1832.

As every student of the subject knows (and as any reader of the book *would* know), the exact opposite is true. One must note Dr. Himmelfarb's comment (p. 44) that "It is an axiom of historical scholarship that a source that is known to be seriously flawed in one respect is 'tainted' as a whole . . ."

George Spater
White River Junction, Vt.

Gertrude Himmelfarb replies:
Mr. Spater is quite right; as everyone knows, Cobbett did not oppose the Reform Act of 1832. What I meant to say—and surely Mr. Spater would agree with me—is that he passionately opposed the *principles* of the Reform Act. For fifteen years, in issue after issue of the *Political Register,* he denounced just that kind of moderate reform, arguing that the evils of "the System" could be corrected only by such radical changes as universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, and the secret ballot—none of which was a part of the Reform Act of 1832. It was his change of position on this issue, as on many others, that exposed him to the charge, so often leveled against him by his contemporaries, of inconsistency and inconstancy.

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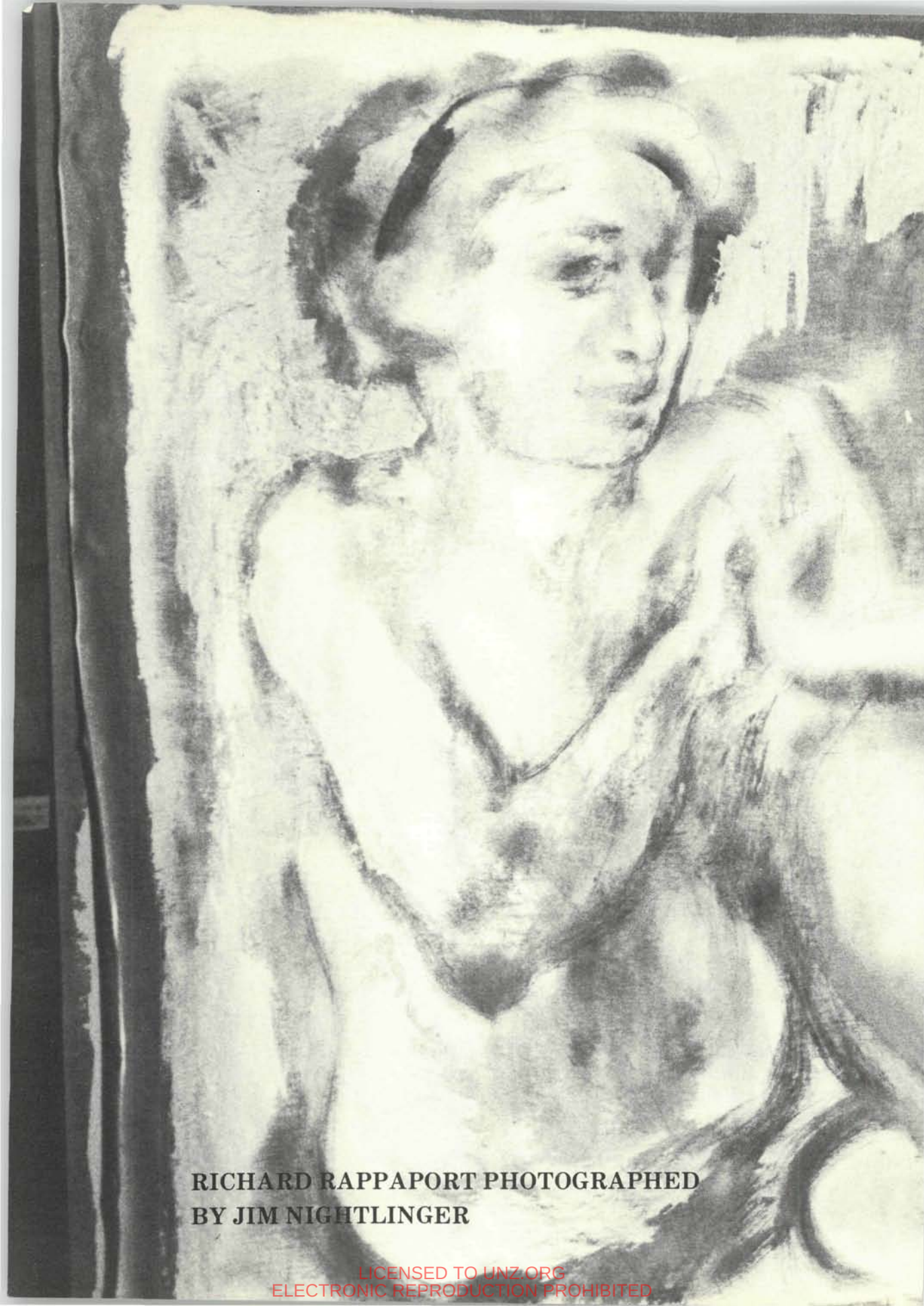

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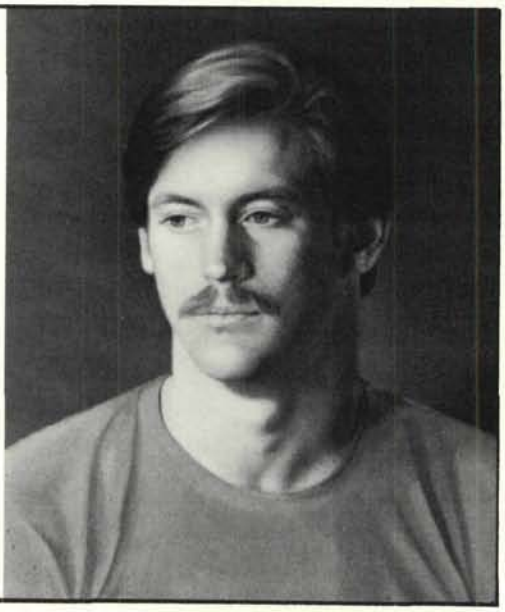

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